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‘THE HOLLOW MEN’: DIVORCE AND MANHOOD  
IN THE NOVELS OF HOWELLS, JAMES, AND WHARTON

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
College of Charleston, 2001

Master of Arts  
University of Charleston, 2003

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2013

Accepted by:

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## DEDICATION

For Lillian

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of several people. I would especially like to thank Dr. Cynthia Davis for her careful guidance and tireless efforts to work closely with me on this project from start to finish. I would also like to thank my other committee members: Dr. Greg Forter, for his invaluable insight; Dr. Catherine Keyser, for her enthusiasm and willingness to jump on board at such a late date; Dr. Lauren Sklaroff, for offering a broader understanding of the historical context; and Dr. David Cowart, for his early involvement with this project. I am also very grateful for my friends and family, especially my parents, Randy and Angela Pluta, for always believing in me and for so much more, and for my husband, William Parker, for his love and patience.

## ABSTRACT

This project examines the relationship between divorce and masculinity as presented in several realist novels written around the turn of the century, including *A Modern Instance* by William Dean Howells, *What Maisie Knew* by Henry James, and *The Custom of the Country* by Edith Wharton. It looks closely at how divorce, which saw a dramatic rise between the years 1880 and 1920, seemingly threatened an elite version of manhood that was already on the decline at this time, a version of manhood increasingly viewed within society as weak and effeminate and one represented in each of these novels by a recurring liminal male figure who suffers most from divorce, even when not directly involved in one himself. Moving this seemingly marginal character to the forefront illuminates the classed and gendered implications surrounding the impact of divorce on this figure in real life and helps us understand the ways in which these realists were actively participating in and engaging with the social issues of their day, rather than simply reflecting life as they saw it. In each of these novels, this anachronistic figure is presented with a sort of sympathetic disdain, creating a tension in these texts rendered thematically by the divisive subject of divorce and informed by conflicting aesthetic and social priorities that shape a critique of both the present moment and the past on which it depends.

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*Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless*

T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: DIVORCE, A SOCIAL THREAT

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a dramatic increase in the rise of divorce, sparking interest in what became known as the “divorce question,” especially between the years of 1880 and 1920 when the subject became one of national dispute. During this time, those engaged in this debate attributed the rapid rise to a number of factors. Some linked it to the women’s movement and to the rise of the “new woman,” while others attributed it to the growth of the city, an expansion of industry, the rise of consumerism, and changing economic conditions. Despite the varied attitudes toward the subject, there is no question that the increasing acceptance of divorce and its subsequent rise occurred during a time of great social upheaval, a time when Victorian strictures were being cast aside, along with many conventional middle-class values and mores. Whether divorce stemmed from these changes or contributed to them is still a subject of much debate and one that created a great tension and anxiety that rippled throughout America at the time. We see this reflected in the speeches and published writings of the day, as well as efforts to stem the rising tide of divorce. This issue was such a divisive one, however, that little became of these efforts, and the number of divorces filed and obtained continued to rise. Meanwhile, the definition of marriage

began to shift, ultimately leading to a reevaluation of the roles that both marriage and the family played in society. While some embraced the greater sense of freedom that divorce seemingly offered, others felt threatened by it and the changes it wrought on established gender ideologies and class structures. What I am most interested in is the way in which divorce seemingly threatened an upper-class masculinity that was already on the decline, an issue that many of the novelists writing during this period address in their works.

William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Edith Wharton are among some of the authors who explore this perceived threat in relation to the tangled nexus of class and gender issues that arose in the midst of these cultural shifts. My focus here is on their novels that take up the politically charged subject of divorce. William Dean Howells became one of the first to address the issue in his 1882 novel *A Modern Instance*, which traces the rise and fall of one couple's marriage. Later, in 1897, Henry James took up the same subject in *What Maisie Knew*, though he takes a slightly different approach than does Howells, exploring the issue through the eyes of a child. In the years that followed, Edith Wharton structured several of her novels and short stories around the subject, most notably *The Custom of the Country*, published in 1913. These novels span the years in which the debate over divorce was most prominent, and a closer look at them reveals the shifting attitudes toward both marriage and divorce, as well as the latter's social, political, and moral implications.

In these novels, Howells, James, and Wharton reveal a deep anxiety about the increasing acceptance of divorce, its causes, and its impact on society. In doing so, they examine the ways in which divorce further blurred the boundaries between the public and private spheres and shook the foundations on which bourgeois society stood. This in turn

raised questions about the roles that middle- and upper-class men and women were expected to play. New opportunities meant greater freedom to satisfy individual desires, but as Howells, James, and Wharton demonstrate this freedom is both costly and dangerous, especially if abused.

This concern emerges most clearly in their complicated portrait of a wounded male figure who functions in each of these novels as a representation of the old order. Possessing characteristics of the dilettante or leisurely gentleman, he is depicted as embodying an elite version of masculinity that was endangered at the time, and in these novels they imagine divorce as a factor contributing to his decline. He is thus presented as a marginalized figure, but I argue here for his centrality. He is a figure who haunts these realist novels about divorce, giving them a certain sense of depth and showing us that realism entails more than simply mimesis. A close look at this flawed figure and each author's ambivalent attitude toward him illuminates the social critique implicit in these texts and helps us better understand how these authors were engaging with and actively responding to social issues, rather than simply recording life as they saw it.

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As historians and sociologists have noted, the definitions of manhood and womanhood that were so central to identity throughout the nineteenth century began to change in the decades before the turn of the century, ultimately prompting what many have identified as a "crisis" in masculinity. In "Consuming Manhood: The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body, 1832-1920," Michael Kimmel attributes these changes to economic shifts that eroded the ground on which manhood

was established, thereby diminishing man's autonomy in society. He goes on to say that "the term manhood was synonymous with the term adulthood," and "[t]o be manly was to accept adult responsibilities as a provider, producer, and protector of a family" (Kimmel 13). Kimmel identifies the Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan as two styles of manhood that were popular up until the nineteenth century, when changing economic conditions forced such men into the unstable atmosphere of the workplace where they had to vie for success. What he calls "Marketplace Manhood" thus emerged in the 1830s (Kimmel 13).

Identity no longer seemed as grounded or secure, and many felt that American culture was becoming too feminized. In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas explains how women during the nineteenth century were becoming "prime consumers" of literature, as well as producers of it, using the literature that they wrote to exert influence over society (8). Meanwhile, men, as Kimmel notes, were increasingly finding themselves in office positions that they regarded as "feminine," sparking fears that they would become weak and effeminate, as would their sons who were predominantly left under the care of women all day. Divorce only further exacerbated this perceived "crisis," for it gave women a sense of autonomy that had traditionally been associated with white middle and upper class manhood during the middle years of the nineteenth century. As Gail Bederman explains in *Manliness and Civilization*, many men during this time began to feel that their manhood was being challenged. In response, they adopted various strategies in an attempt to redefine and / or regain this lost sense of manhood. Fearing "neurasthenia," which doctors attributed to "excessive brain work and nervous strain," a number of middle-class men began shifting their focus to the body, a

site they could still control (Bederman 14). As a result, these men began to engage in sports and exercise in an attempt to attain the form of the rugged, primitive man who worked the land. Consequently, Bederman explains, this hard, rugged form of masculinity that had previously been associated with the working class soon became the ideal, and this ideal stands in stark contrast to previous versions of white middle and upper class manhood that were associated with self-mastery, a firm sense of morals, and authority – all elements that the notion of divorce on some levels challenged.

Reactions to these changes varied. Some, as historian T.J. Jackson Lears explains in *No Place of Grace*, felt victimized by these changing values and attitudes, prompting an anti-modern impulse “rooted” in what he calls a “crisis of cultural authority” (5). We can situate this “crisis of cultural authority” alongside the crisis of masculinity, for the two are closely related and both are tied to economic and cultural shifts that created a fragmented sense of the self, particularly for the “custodians of culture” (Lears xiv). Like Kimmel and Bederman, Lears observes how this sense of fragmentation and perceived loss of identity prompted the adoption and consumption of older forms or symbols of the past, which in turn only contributed to the shift in society from production to consumption. He especially focuses on how the American bourgeoisie clung to values associated with the republican tradition, including self-control and autonomy, in a time when many felt overwhelmed by a “spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility” (Lears 4). In part, he identifies this yearning for “authentic experience” as a reaction against the dilettantism of the leisure class, against what many viewed as weakness and enervation alongside the feminization of American culture.

One attempt at regeneration manifested itself through the literature of the day, as many aimed to capture “the romance of fierce emotions and manly actions – of ‘real life’” – in action and adventure stories (Lears 102). With the resurgence of this particular genre came a critique of domestic realism. Critics argued that such novels lacked action and that they failed to capture the intense struggles of life. This created anxieties in both men and women, but “especially the men who had chosen literary or intellectual careers. Distrusting their own usefulness in an activist society, they traced enervation to feminization because they equated masculinity with forcefulness” (Lears 104). These anxieties are present in each of these novels by Howells, James, and Wharton and surface most clearly in their sympathetic critique of this recurrent effeminate figure.

Possessing an aristocratic and genteel air, he is presented as a member of a dying breed who struggles to find his place in the modern world. He is, in many ways, shown as grappling with the crisis in elite masculinity that was taking place at this time and is presented as being akin to the increasingly anachronistic Genteel Patriarch. He is “refined, elegant, and given to casual sensuousness,” all qualities that Kimmel attributes to this style of manhood (Kimmel, “Consuming Manhood” 13). Associated with the upper class and a life of leisure, this figure attempts to define himself by his family name and through property ownership. He represents “a dignified aristocratic manhood, committed to the British upper-class code of honor and to well-rounded character, with exquisite tastes and manners and refined sensibilities” (Kimmel, *Manhood* 16). Moreover, this particular figure “embodied love, kindness, duty, and compassion” and participated in philanthropic activities (Kimmel, *Manhood* 16). A family man, he felt it is his duty to offer moral guidance to his sons. It is no surprise, then, that divorce makes this

patriarchal authority figure uneasy, for it disrupted his increasingly residual way of life. When the markers of his status in society are upset, this man of leisure finds himself displaced, and within these novels he typically functions as a victim, but he is a victim who is also critiqued.

By positioning him as such, these authors suggest an affinity for him, which is fraught by his association with a leisured lifestyle, with idleness. As Amy Kaplan explains in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, realism, especially for Howells, afforded a new mode of representation that looked “beyond the traditionally ‘cultured classes’” (16). In writing, Howells sought to move beyond the conventions associated with the romance and to distinguish himself as a productive writer and reader. As Kaplan asserts, he associates the romance with idleness, “with the leisured gentleman of letters, who treats art either as a treasured possession or a dilettante’s pursuit” (Kaplan 16). In contrast, realism for Howells is “productive work” (Kaplan 21). Wharton too came to adopt a very similar view. Writing, for her, served “as a protest against the wastefulness of upper-class idleness” (Kaplan 68). Given these attitudes, it comes as no surprise that this figure, who is associated with “upper-class idleness,” is essentially removed in each of these author’s novels; divorce, whether directly or indirectly, brings ruin to him. This removal of the idle gentleman then can be read as both a reflection of his increasingly marginal status in society, duly documented by these realists, and also as an attempt by Howells, James, and Wharton to “divorce” themselves from this figure whom society had begun to regard as weak and effeminate but for whom they seem to manifest a lingering affection in making him so otherwise sympathetic.

What results is an ambivalence shaped by both professional and social interests. On one level, these authors are, as Michael Davitt Bell asserts in *The Problem of American Realism*, attempting to “neutraliz[e] anxieties about the writer’s status in a culture still intensely suspicious or contemptuous of ‘art’ and the ‘artistic,’” which many were associating with weakness or the feminine (7). Yet they are not wholly able to dismiss this figure whose troubled position in society reflects an awareness of their own. As Lears notes, “ambivalence [was] especially severe among those for whom gender identity was most problematic: women who sought ‘masculine’ careers in public life, men who nurtured ‘feminine’ aspirations toward literature, art, or the increasingly ‘feminized’ ministry” (221) -- in other words, for the very authors addressed in this study. By presenting this figure ambivalently, they are not only reflecting the struggles a particular class and gender faced at this time, but they are also actively participating in the construction of these shifting gender identities and in defining the role of the author in society.

As many critics, including Kaplan, have suggested, realism functions as a strategy for “managing the threats of social change” (10). Divorce, as we see in these novels, is presented as one such threat, and in each it is tied to a sense of moral failing. With this figure, then, who finds himself distraught by divorce, we see these authors’ interest, as realists, in moral issues, or what William M. Morgan calls a “concern for a humane social ethics” (10). Thus, while the principles governing each author’s work ethic and aesthetic inform a sort of disdain for this figure, their sympathy for him suggests that he, or this particular type of manhood, rather, embodies characteristics that they imagine in some ways would help combat the pervading sense of moral decline in society at this time.



Among other complications, to the extent that Howells, James, and Wharton represent this recurring character sympathetically, they essentially look back to the past, thereby creating a tension in these texts marked by realism's association with the present moment.

This tension, or ambivalence, echoes the tenor of turn-of-the-century public sentiment, an appropriate reflection given the realist tendencies of these authors, but one that also suggests a sustained preoccupation with this subject. Through their depiction of this anachronistic figure who struggles to assert his manhood in the face of divorce, we become aware of each author's own struggle objectively to represent a reality that he or she also actively participates in constructing. In many ways, this figure thus functions as a reflection of the pull between the traditional and the modern that Howells, James, and Wharton each faced. While they all to a certain extent reveal a longing for traditional or residual values, they also recognize that the traditional values associated with this particular type of manhood and embodied by this figure cannot survive or thrive in the modern world, and the suggestion is that this loss (of both values and of a particular style of manhood) can have detrimental effects on both the family unit and society.

Hence, modern society, despite a recognition of its appeals, including a greater sense of mobility and certain sense of freedom, in these novels is largely depicted as a force of destruction, and divorce, as a violent severance, is imagined as both cause and effect. As Jennifer Travis observes in *Wounded Hearts: Masculinity, Law, and Literature in American Culture*, "[t]he modern marriage frequently was described as a contemporary battleground" (51). This metaphorical description is apparent in all three novels. It reflects not only the courtroom battle, but also the split in American consciousness over

the issue of divorce, which furthered the breakdown of divisions between gender roles and between the public and private spheres, for in the courtroom the private was made public. It was a place where the domestic and business world collided. This becomes significant if we consider how, as Elaine Tyler May explains in *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*, the home and society were inextricably linked in the Victorian ethos, with the home being considered the foundation on which society stood and with great emphasis being placed on one's duty.

While these divisions had already begun to crumble by the turn of the century, divorce, as these authors illustrate (though to varying degrees), carried the potential to further create havoc in the home and ultimately in society. With this conflicted figure (and their conflicted attitude toward him), we see an internal struggle that demonstrates how these authors were engaging with and actively responding to social change, critiquing both the past as an outdated and ineffective mode and also the present moment that is marked in these novels by a certain sense of loss.

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Over the years, a number of historians and sociologists have examined these shifting definitions of marriage and have taken up the issue of divorce to identify more fully both its causes and its consequences. In *Divorce in the Progressive Era*, William O'Neill offers a historical look at the subject and explores the changing ideology of the day and the responses elicited from these changes. Elaine Tyler May does the same in *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*, while arguing that unfulfilled expectations based on ideals set forth by the emergent mass media were a

large contributing factor to marital breakdown at this time. Glenda Riley is another scholar who, in *Divorce: An American Tradition*, traces how attitudes toward the subject have changed over the years by providing a history of divorce in America beginning with the Puritans. As noted in these histories and others, divorce was a rare occurrence prior to the mid 1800s, and even as it became more common in the mid nineteenth century divorces were still difficult to obtain, with laws surrounding the issue varying from state to state.<sup>1</sup> This prompted the rise of migratory divorces, with many flocking westward where the laws were more lax. This western movement calls to mind those early European settlers who set off to conquer the frontier and start fresh, while divorce itself is suggestive of America's break from England. Given these associations, it is no surprise that many historians situate divorce and its rise within a distinctly American context, despite the fact that it is not strictly an American phenomenon, as both James and Wharton show. The symbolic significance and topicality of this subject made it one that the realists found hard to resist, and by making divorce their subject they also pursued their ethical and aesthetic aims of essentially de-romanticizing love and marriage.

Considering the widespread ramifications of divorce and the increasing public interest in the subject, the lack of literary criticism devoted to this topic is surprising. What we get instead is criticism focused largely on the representation of marriage rather than on the representation of divorce. Granted, the two subjects are inextricably related, but the ways in which novelists represented divorce in their works are deserving of a closer look. Sociologist James H. Barnett was one of the first to address the subject in

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<sup>1</sup> Other histories and sociological analyses include Nelson Manfred Blake's *The Road to Reno: A History of Divorce in the United States*, Norma Basch's *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians*, Herbie J. DiFonzo's *Beneath the Fault Line: The Popular and Legal Culture of Divorce in Twentieth-Century America*, Joseph Epstein's *Divorced in America*, and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's *The Divorce Culture*, among others.

1939 with *Divorce and the American Divorce Novel, 1858-1937*. Taking a sociological approach, Barnett focuses on how the literature of the time reflected popular opinion. He begins with a lengthy history of divorce in the United States, and while he includes several novels in this study he does little more than reveal how these novels set forth varying attitudes and opinions toward the subject. Years later, Debra MacComb took up this same issue in *Tales of Liberation, Strategies of Containment: Divorce and the Representation of Womanhood in American Fiction: 1880-1920*, published in 2000. Here, MacComb, as many historians have done, identifies divorce as a distinct feature of American life before going on to explore the impact of divorce on women as represented in the novels written during this time period. More specifically, she is interested in how women “are represented negotiating feminine roles and values around faltering marriages” and asserts that “[s]uch negotiations invariably test whether divorce functions in a text as a strategy for containment and preservation of old hegemonies, or as a legitimate mode of liberation and expansion of feminine roles” (MacComb xi). While her analysis is valuable, her focus, as her title indicates, is on women. She ultimately overlooks the effect of divorce on male roles and the construct of masculinity.

Of these larger studies, Kimberly A. Freeman’s *Love American Style: Divorce and the American Novel, 1881-1976*, is one of few to analyze the literary significance of divorce as represented by various authors. In this study, Freeman examines the impact of divorce on the American novel, arguing that the subject of divorce encompasses elements of both romanticism and realism, thereby fostering a distinct American literary form. While Freeman offers a very thorough analysis of the novels she discusses, she limits

herself by considering divorce as primarily American in nature. She also offers us a very broad look at the subject, focusing on novels that span the years 1881 to 1976.

Other studies focus largely on individual works and authors. While divorce has certainly remained a very prominent subject in recent years, a closer look at the novels written during the years when the debate was at its height has much to offer, as does a focus on its relationship to an endangered upper class masculinity that is addressed within.

Chapter two focuses on William Dean Howells's *A Modern Instance* and his complicated portrait of the sensitive Ben Halleck, a figure who finds himself conflicted when divorce forces him to question his duty – to himself and to others – along with the principles on which he has based his identity as a gentleman. Because divorce was in the air and on the minds of his contemporaries, it is easy to see why Howells, as a writer committed to realism, was drawn to the subject. Further, Howells, with what Kaplan calls his “aesthetic of the common,” recognized in divorce a certain democratic appeal in its potential to upset the established social order and foster a commonality (53). Despite its appeal, the subject of divorce posed complications that hindered the total achievement of his aesthetic and social goals, and it is this conflict that emerges thematically as a tension in the text through his depiction of Halleck's moral dilemma. As Bell asserts, Howells viewed the realist as a “socially responsible moral instructor” (72). This involves “discrediting” what he calls “*irresponsible* – the ‘romantic,’ the ‘literary,’ the ‘artificial,’ the merely ‘artistic’” – and accounts for his positioning the genteel and romantic Halleck as an outcast (Bell 48). Yet Howells recognizes in Halleck qualities and characteristics that he admires and with which he perhaps could identify, including a sense of tradition

and altruism rooted in a past that he imagines divorce threatened. This is a past, however, from which Howells, with his focus as a realist on the present moment, professionally sought to distance himself. As Kaplan observes, Howells was “a transitional figure” between an older generation of genteel literary gentlemen and a newer generation of businessmen, or editors of popular magazines (18). She suggests that he “saw himself as the guardian of tradition” and that he took on “the role of educator and enlightened guide” (18). Notably, this role is one that stands in opposition to his efforts to establish the commonality for which he strove. We see here then that realism, as Kaplan asserts, “is not to reflect passively a solid reality; it is to face the paradoxical imperative to use fiction to combat the fictionality of everyday life; unable to anchor itself in a stable referent, it must restore or construct a new sense of the real” (20). Howells, as author, thus attempts to position the realist novel as a solidifying force against the shifts occurring in society at this time, and while these are shifts that he presents without explicit critique in accordance with his anti-romantic, anti-sentimental aesthetic principles, his efforts to position his novel as such a force is a move which in some ways conflicts with his goal of objectively representing perceived realities.

Chapter three focuses on Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*. Like Howells, James explores the social and moral failings of a corrupt society and views divorce as a symptom of the modern condition, illustrating that divorce in a corrupt society peopled by money-hungry, aspiring socialites, has the potential to further such corruption. Hence James, as does Howells, reveals anxieties about what is morally right and wrong and sets out in this satire to expose the hypocrisies he sees inherent within society, an unorthodox move for him that parallels his subject matter, for James did not write with the purpose of

offering moral instruction; rather, he sought to depict life as he perceived it. As James himself notes in his essay “The Art of Fiction,” art and morality are two very different things, but he does acknowledge a point at which they nearly intersect, explaining that “the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer” (26). He states in his “Preface to the New York Edition” of *The Portrait of a Lady*, the subject is “nothing without the posted presence of the watcher – without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his ‘moral’ reference” (James 7). James, however, discovered that the subject of divorce, which inherently revolved around questions of freedom and morality, presented him with complications. On one hand, he found the subject, with its emphasis on difference and variety, aesthetically appealing; on the other, he found himself wary of its potential to destroy structures, customs, and traditions that he favored on a social level. This creates a tension in the text best seen in his depiction of the elegant and polite Sir Claude, who faces exile – literally by the divorce that Ida wants and figuratively by embodying a leisured type of manhood that society viewed as ineffective, a type of manhood associated with a sense of order and tradition that, for James, had its appeals. Consequently, he sympathizes with this figure’s longing for a sense of order in his life, and in an attempt to counter the disorder that is present on a thematic level he creates a novel with a formal structure that contrasts sharply with the lack of structure in the lives of his characters, suggesting that realism as James practiced it, and art itself, can do what the modern family no longer can.

Chapter four offers an exploration of divorce as presented in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, a novel that she wrote while going through a divorce herself. Here, she offers a scathing indictment of the "rotary marriages" that were increasing in popularity during this time and is especially critical of the press that popularized them and of social climbers who used them to their advantage (Lee 367). We see this in the novel through her depiction of Undine, who regards marriage as a business and husbands as commodities that can be used and tossed aside. Wharton's unease over Undine's disregard for traditions and conventionalities demonstrates her engagement with the larger debates that were taking place contemporaneously. As Kaplan acknowledges, Wharton "struggled to become an active 'maker of art' both against a male tradition which objectifies women as passive, beautiful objects and against the limited role of 'the lady novelist'" (65). Wharton thus grudgingly demonstrates respect for Undine as a force to be reckoned with, while attempting to distance herself from the wastefulness of the nouveau riche documented by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Undine's mobility (and the freedom she obtains from divorce) is emphasized throughout, though as Wharton keenly observes divorce imposes limitations as well. We see this especially with her depiction of the New York aristocrat Ralph Marvell, who suffers great losses as a result of his marriage to – and subsequent divorce from – Undine. He is throughout the novel depicted as weak, and the values that he holds are depicted in the same way. For this weakness, which is associated throughout with a romantic outlook, Wharton critiques him. In marrying Undine, he thought that he was entering into "a love-match of the good old kind," but through Undine's request for a divorce, Wharton suggests that marriage, in the traditional sense, is becoming an "obsolete institution"



(Wharton, *Custom* 220, 221). Wharton thus paints a sympathetic (yet critical) portrait of a man who is wounded when divorce brings his world – and everything he, and to a large extent she, believes in – crashing down around him. It opens his eyes to a reality formerly marred by his idealistic vision, but this is a reality that Wharton simultaneously critiques by positioning divorces like the socially and financially advantageous ones Undine pursues as its product.

Hence, within these novels, Howells, James, and Wharton reveal their own unease over the subject of divorce, which is in many ways depicted as a threat to a particular style of manhood that is associated with the traditional and with the upper class. Notably, however, many of the causes attributed to divorce are the same as those attributed to the crisis in masculinity and to the “crisis of cultural authority” that Lears identifies. What emerges then is a marked tension in these texts between a sort of nostalgia for the past and its traditions that is juxtaposed against realism’s concern with the present (as defined by Howells and James), for in offering us a realistic portrait of life Howells, James, and Wharton were in many ways severing ties to the past and exploring new opportunities available to them as they attempted to define more clearly their own roles as authors in society.

## CHAPTER 2

### “I BELONG NOWHERE”: DIVORCE AND THE DECLINE OF THE GENTLEMAN IN HOWELLS’S *A MODERN INSTANCE*

By the 1880s, divorce was becoming increasingly commonplace in modern American society, though attitudes toward the issue remained mixed. It was a politically charged and divisive subject when William Dean Howells chose to explore it as a theme in his 1882 novel *A Modern Instance*. The idea for the novel came to him in 1876 after attending a performance of Euripides’s *Medea* in Boston, which he likened to accounts of marital failure that were appearing more and more frequently in the press. As he told a journalist years later, “This is an Indiana divorce case” (Cady, *The Road to Realism* 207). Having begun preliminary work on the novel in 1878, he traveled to Crawfordsville, Indiana, in April of 1881 to witness an actual divorce trial, a trial from which he drew much of his material for the courtroom scene. For Howells, realism held a political and social function, and as a realist, Howells strove for “the truthful treatment of material” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 38). He sought to portray life accurately, and as he noted in an outline for the novel, divorce had indeed become a “fact” of modern life by this time (qtd. in the publisher’s note to *A Modern Instance* iii). By centering his novel around the theme of divorce, Howells is recognizing both its thematic potential as a literary device and its real-life detrimental consequences on society as a whole.

On a professional level, Howells as both editor and author was engaging in a divorce of sorts by attempting to distance U.S. literary output from still-prevalent literary forms, especially the sentimental romance and the popular sensational literature of the day. Both had to an extent become associated with the feminine, while the latter, as Kaplan asserts, constituted a competing force against realism's goal of constructing a shared reality. Kaplan identifies Howells's literary democratic impulse as an "aesthetic of the common" and explains how it "works to ensure that social difference be ultimately effaced by a vision of common humanity, which mirrors the readers' own commonplace, or everyday life" (Kaplan 21).

Divorce, however, calls attention to the very "social difference" that Howells sought to move beyond, and it further contributed to shifts in society that limited the cultural authority of those holding positions of power in years past, including the editor.<sup>2</sup> In an essay dubbed "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business," Howells ponders the status of the artist in society at this time and attempts to dismantle classed and gendered distinctions to demonstrate that the man of letters, or the realist writer, is "of the masses," an equation that he simultaneously resists, as is evident in the essay itself, which, with its titular "man" and masculine imagery, seems to uphold the very gendered (and classed) distinctions that he aimed to dismantle (*Criticism and Fiction* 308). He firmly believed that the novelist was not to write merely to entertain, but that 'he assumes a higher function, something like that of a physician or a priest, and they expect him to be bound by laws as sacred as those of such professions; they hold him solemnly pledged not to

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<sup>2</sup> While divorce is not transparently about classed difference – a type of difference that troubled Howells – it did in later years come to function as a marker of such. We see in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* how the old New York aristocracy shunned divorce as a means of preserving a threatened elite status. Meanwhile, newcomers like Undine recognized in divorce a potential for advancement up the social ladder. Debra MacComb discusses this more fully in *Tales of Liberation, Strategies of Containment* (149).

betray them or abuse their confidence” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 73). By asserting that the novelist holds “a higher function,” he grants the novelist a sense of cultural authority associated with the elite, a sense of authority that in some ways directly conflicts with his democratic ethos. This conflict contributes to the anxiety that is present within this novel and shapes Howells’s depiction of the crippled Halleck.

Howells at once presents the figure of Ben Halleck in both a critical and sympathetic light, an observation that other critics, including Kenneth E. Eble, have made as well.<sup>3</sup> As Eble notes, though, many of these critics have regarded the secondary characters in this novel, including Ben Halleck, as a “weakness.” While Eble refutes the idea that they are mere “padding,” he does find their presence “questionable,” regarding them primarily as “an important part of the fabric of New England society, with old values struggling to stay alive amid great change” (82).<sup>4</sup> There is no question that Halleck is indeed representative of the “old values” that Eble mentions, but to regard him as simply a representation of such is limiting.

By moving Halleck from the margins to the center, we are better able to understand the crucial role that he plays in this novel. Even though he is not directly involved in the divorce himself, he suffers from it the most. A close look at this figure thus illuminates Howells’s investment in literature that confronted the social forces at work in his era and offers us a glimpse of the adversities faced by those who embodied

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<sup>3</sup> George C. Carrington, Jr., discusses how “Halleck would win our sympathy were it not for the exaggeration of his reactions, which carry him beyond the norms of the Howells world into a series of baroque moods and actions” (74). Yet, he goes on to conclude that readers ultimately do sympathize with him, rather than with Atherton, “for all his tiresome faults” (75).

<sup>4</sup> Edwin H. Cady, for example, in *The Road to Realism*, identifies what he views as a weakness in the latter part of the novel – “its tendency to wander” – and asserts that Howells “largely wasted four chapters in exploring the lives of his Proper Bostonians” (210).

this particular style of manhood. Even May, in her history of divorce, acknowledges that “one of the most neglected areas of social history is the changing role of men” (7).

Howells, through his depiction of Halleck as a “neglected” figure, points to a link between the decline of what he values most in that older and elite version of manhood, which had become something of an anachronism in Howells’s day, and the rise in divorce. Specifically, Howells locates in the effeminate patrician Halleck an inner-directed sense of manhood that the unscrupulous journalist Bartley Hubbard lacks, a sense of manhood driven by a strong moral faculty, an awareness of one’s duty, and a desire to help others – all qualities that inform Howells’s work ethic and social outlook and consequently shape his sympathies toward this character. As a realist, however, Howells resisted these sympathetic leanings, and this resistance partially accounts for his presentation of Halleck as ineffectual.

With his innate sense of goodness, Halleck struggles to act in accordance with what he believes is right, but these struggles are marked by a firm sense of failure seen through Halleck’s inability to make Marcia, whom he idealizes, his wife. William M. Morgan, in *Questionable Charity: Gender, Humanitarianism, and Complicity in U.S. Literary Realism*, suggests this sense of failure and guilt that characterizes fictions of manhood in realist novels stems from an inability “to deliver the humane, egalitarian formation of republican democracy that its advocates remember promising to the nation” (7). This democratic impulse and egalitarian outlook is what Howells, as a realist, aimed to share with his readers, and Howells’s own anxieties over shifts in society that made it difficult to achieve his goals surface in his presentation of the sensitive and genteel Halleck. In imagining divorce as a threat to this particular figure, we see Howells both

reflecting on and actively responding to two perceived crises that were taking place in society in the latter part of the 1800s – the crisis of masculinity, which many attributed to the apparent feminization of American culture, and the crisis of cultural authority, which implicitly involved class issues.

In part, the romantic and idealistic Halleck represents inclinations that Howells, as a realist, sought to repudiate. Nonetheless, Howells sympathizes with Halleck's struggle to come to terms with what he perceives to be a painful moral or ethical dilemma and suggests through Halleck's overall sympathetic portrayal that the traditional values embodied by this refined and introspective character are being sacrificed to modernity. While in many respects a minor character in the novel, Halleck ultimately emerges as key to understanding the tension between Howells's aesthetic and social concerns in *A Modern Instance* and to tracing the unease and contradictions that surface when Howells's desire to objectively represent a "modern" reality on one hand rubs up against his simultaneous desire to critique that reality and to valorize a kinder, more humane alternative that he simultaneously portrays as outmoded. With Halleck, we see the limits of Howells's investment in the common. In making divorce, which inherently accentuates differences over commonality, his major theme, Howells was in some ways undermining his own goal of achieving solidarity even as he was realizing his goal of moving beyond the conventional love plot. This conflict between his aesthetic and social priorities is projected onto the crippled Halleck, who agonizes over the subject of divorce, desiring it for personal reasons and abhorring it for cultural ones. This split in turn reflects the divisions within Howells's realist tenets, as well as his anxieties over shifting definitions of love, marriage, morality, and masculinity. Unable to fully resolve these tensions,

Howells ultimately presents Halleck as ineffectual, which suggests Howells's impasse, his recognition that the moral values Halleck represents and which he admires are ultimately rendered anachronistic in (or by) this "modern instance."

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Howells, as a realist, was breaking away from literary tradition in that aesthetically he was attempting to do something new. We see this in his movement away from the traditional love plot, which often culminated with a happily ever after marriage of sorts. As Freeman observes, "marriage has been pivotal to the plot and shape of the novel, serving as its comedic culmination, after a myriad of obstacles, as well as serving as the tragic and romantic framework for adultery" (x). In *A Modern Instance*, Howells dismantles the primary marriage that he presents us with, thematizing his distaste for conventional and idealized "happily-ever-afters."

He favored instead a realistic approach, proclaiming, "let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know [. . .] and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 51). His emphasis on "usefulness" in this passage is closely related to his desire to establish the novelist as "serious" and "right-minded," qualities that we can associate with a traditional version of manhood that stood on relatively firm ground prior to the crises in masculinity that occurred in the 1800s (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 49).

Howells's desire to present life as it is, rather than life as it ought to be, to focus on the present rather than the past, and on the common or everyday rather than the ideal

or privileged, accounts for his subsequent and related movement away from residual literary forms like the romance and sentimental novel. He felt that such forms “hurt because they are not true – not because they are malevolent, but because they are idle lies about human nature and the social fabric, which it behooves us to know and understand, that we may deal justly with ourselves and with one another” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 47). In this passage, Howells adopts a democratic stance as he calls for truth and justice, both in fiction and in life. He viewed realism as ““democracy in literature,”” leading him to critique the romance for “its enslavement to past conventions, its idealization of subject matter, and its aristocratic pretensions” (Kaplan 18, 16). Romance, as Kaplan observes, “becomes a catchword in his lexicon for an elitist conception of culture as the inherited and well guarded property of the upper classes” (16). It is a form that Howells came to associate with “the leisured gentleman of letters,” a figure who, in the larger culture, was increasingly and pejoratively being associated with the feminine, and consequently with leisure and consumption (Kaplan 16).

Despite his attempts to disassociate his writing from what the public considered feminine, Howells knew that he was largely writing for a female audience.<sup>5</sup> Howells affirms this in his essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” when he says, “The man of letters must make up his mind that in the United States the fate of a book is in the hands of the women. It is the women with us who have the most leisure, and they read the most books. [. . .] As I say, the author of light literature, and often the author of solid literature, must resign himself to obscurity unless the ladies choose to recognize him” (*Criticism and Fiction* 305-306). Here, Howells directly links “leisure” with the feminine

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Douglas, among others, describes in *The Feminization of American Culture* how women by the latter part of the 1800s had become the “prime consumers of American culture” (8).



and goes on in this essay to establish himself as “the author of solid literature” (“solid” being a term suggestive of a masculine firmness).

Moreover, we can associate solidity with Howells’s vision of the common. He aimed in fiction to demonstrate that we all share a common and accessible bond despite social or gender differences. The goal, of what Kaplan terms his “aesthetic of the common,” “is to further the democratization process by introducing people of different classes and regions to one another to make them ‘know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity’” (Kaplan 22). We see this attempt in *A Modern Instance* as Howells brings the orphaned Bartley Hubbard and the villager Marcia Gaylord into contact with the Halleck family and the lawyer Atherton, Bostonians who run in elite circles. By bringing people of various social classes together (and by acknowledging their diversity), Howells works toward creating solidarity, or a common ground, in fiction. He demonstrates a desire to move beyond the classed and gendered distinctions that had arisen in society at this time to show that “Men are more like than unlike one another” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 87). The divisive issue of divorce, however, only highlights the different values and principles that define these characters, along with the respective backgrounds and social groups that help shape their beliefs. Even the novel itself seems to be about the inability to find this common ground, ending with Halleck and Atherton still in disagreement. While Kaplan does not directly address Howells’s treatment of the subject of divorce, she does acknowledge that despite realism’s goal of encompassing diverse elements of society, “Howells shows discomfort with evidence of social difference, which often appears indistinguishable from social conflict” (23). As Howells recognized, both social difference and social conflict carry the

potential for social fragmentation, thereby hindering his efforts to achieve the solidity for which he strove.

As he acknowledges, ““at present business is the only human solidarity, we are all bound together by that chain”” (qtd. in Kaplan 43). “Solidarity” is what binds us and what Howells hoped realism could achieve. In Kaplan’s view, the realists “often assume a world which lacks solidity [. . .] a world in which, according to historian Jackson Lears, ‘reality itself began to seem problematic, something to be sought rather than merely lived’” (9). With his realist fiction, Howells hoped to compensate for and counteract a perceived insubstantiality in reality, yet he recognized that business, which would include the mass market, was currently the “only” avenue successful in achieving this goal, and this avenue at the time was crowded with a type of literature whose consumption Howells regarded as a form of idleness.

With this distinction between solid and light literature, we see that realism was in large part defined in opposition to sentimentalism and romanticism by the realists themselves. Since then, a number of critics have sustained this opposition and the gendered ideologies that surround it, just as others have challenged it. Alfred Habegger, for instance, in his 1982 *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*, identifies Howells as a “sissy” and asserts that becoming a “man of letters” offered “an escape from both the threat of feminization and the pressures of normal masculinity” (62). Michael Davitt Bell, meanwhile, in *The Problem of American Realism* (1993), describes how “a prominent function of claiming to be a realist or a naturalist in this period was to provide assurance to one’s society and oneself that one was a ‘real’ man rather than an effeminate

‘artist’” (6). While these theories undoubtedly demonstrate the gendered politics surrounding realism, they are both somewhat dated and oversimplified.

As many critics in recent years have shown, the realists actually owed much to these other movements. Morgan, for example, is one who charts the similarities between realism and sentimentalism, asserting that “realism modernizes sentimentality” (2).<sup>6</sup> He goes on to explain that both share a democratic ethos in response to vexing social problems. In doing so, he looks beyond the gendered polarities surrounding realism and sentimentalism to “argue that a realist sense of manhood is inevitably fashioned in relation to a late Victorian ethos of social care and humanitarian commitment – a commitment that evolves out of sentimentalism and domesticity” (5). This “social care and humanitarian commitment” are qualities that Halleck embodies in this novel. They are also qualities that, despite being rooted in these residual forms from which Howells sought to move away, inform Howells’s understanding of realism, which he “validates [. . .] as productive work for both readers and writers, and thereby locates it within the producer’s ethos of the middle class” (Kaplan 16).

Howells’s conflicting concerns surface in his blighted admiration for Halleck as he presents us with a picture of the modern gentleman, enfeebled by weakness. We see this, for example, when Halleck’s sister Olive muses on Halleck’s “ridiculous, romantic way of taking the world to heart” [. . .] ‘You may be sure he’s troubled about something that doesn’t concern him in the least. It’s what comes of the life-long conscientiousness

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<sup>6</sup> Kimberly A. Freeman is another who, in *Love American Style: Divorce and the American Novel: 1881-1976*, identifies divorce as a topic that fuses elements of the romance with realism, thereby creating a different type of American literary form.

of his parents” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 199). In this passage, Howells critiques the “romantic,” which Olive terms “ridiculous,” and the focus here is on Halleck’s “heart” (traditionally gendered feminine), rather than the “head” (traditionally gendered masculine). Inherent within this critique, however, is admiration for the “conscientiousness” of the Halleck family. Morgan locates this “conscientiousness” in “an antebellum model of principled manliness and citizenship” that he argues is aligned with both a sentimental and “Common Sense philosophical heritage” (24). Morgan identifies this version of manhood as a type of “conscientious selfhood” largely “defined by ‘principle’” (24). This conscientiousness informs Howells’s works. His call, as a realist, for “fidelity to experience and probability of motive” demonstrates an attempt to be forthcoming and just in representing the modern moment and present-day value, accounting for his reluctance to sentimentalize and to idealize this anachronistic version of manhood that he nonetheless admires (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 15).

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The subject of divorce thus afforded Howells the opportunity to present himself as a serious-minded novelist, one who addressed matters of social import. With his democratic ethos, Howells wanted to upset a class-bound order that inhibited the growth of democracy, just as he wanted to put a realistic spin on the traditional love plot. Divorce, Howells recognized, carried the potential to do both -- in real life and in fiction -- but not without complications. Riley, for example, explains how, “After the American Revolution, the customary view of marriage as a patriarchal structure was increasingly challenged by an emerging ideal of companionate marriage – a union based on a partnership of friends and equals” (55). This new “ideal,” with its emphasis on

“partnership,” or equality, is one that encouraged the commonality or solidarity that Howells strove for in literature and in real life. Yet, as Riley acknowledges, it was an ideal, and the realist Howells was “skeptical of idealism in any stripe” (Morgan 24).

Some historians, including May, have identified idealistic expectations in real life as a contributing factor to the increase in divorce rates. As Riley observes, one “stress factor was Americans’ rising expectations of marriage, which created more disappointment with marriage – and thus more divorce” (55). Like Howells the realist, opponents of divorce regarded lofty expectations as dangerous because they were unrealistic. These same opponents also recognized that such expectations carried the potential to upset an established order based on marriage and the restraint of unruly passions.

While a desire for personal satisfaction would not become a leading factor in divorce cases until closer to the turn of the century, the cases of the 1880s and 1890s show early instances of a movement toward the fulfillment of personal desires. May describes how most of the cases during the late 1880s revolved around failure to fulfill clearly defined roles and duties, explaining that “it was breaches in proper conduct that led to domestic upheaval” (47). She stresses that divorces at this time did not typically result from “a quest for something new” (47). “Something new,” however, is just what Howells was seeking to accomplish via the emergent mode of realism, but many of his realist tenets, along with the beliefs shaping his social outlook, are rooted in values associated with the Victorian past, including his emphasis on duty, which is informed by

a clear sense of morality that defined an older version of manhood and a traditional view of marriage.<sup>7</sup>

As historians have pointed out, the divorce debates largely hinged around the question of morality, or the perceived lack thereof, in modern society. May describes how during the 1880s, “Familial and communal ethics still held strong” (26). Communal values depended on personal conduct and adherence to Victorian code. Divorce resulted when husbands and wives deviated from this code, from clearly outlined duties that men and women were expected to perform. As May explains, “Sex roles were defined in terms of civic goals; and the home itself functioned as an institution geared toward the public good” (47). During the height of the Victorian era, public life was largely dependent on private life. In *Divorce in the Progressive Era*, O’Neill describes how behind “almost every attack on divorce was the belief that the family was the foundation of society (or the state, the race, and civilization, depending upon the speaker), and that divorce destroyed the family as an institution and consequently threatened the existence of that larger entity of which it was the basic unit” (58). This fear of social collapse, based on disintegration of the family unit, was a very real fear held by moral conservatives at the

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<sup>7</sup> As May explains, the more traditional understanding was that “marriage was based on duties and sacrifices, not personal satisfaction” (47). In *Divorce in the Progressive Era*, William L. O’Neill largely attributes the rise in divorce rates to industrial shifts that changed the family structure, which in turn contributed to the rise of individualism (a topic that May takes up). He observes a reduction from the extended family “to its nuclear core,” where the “father dwindled from a majestic authority to a mere first among wage-earning equals [. . .]. The family unit was thus exposed to unprecedented strains at the same time that its internal resources were diminished. In its crippled form the family, which was no longer supported by the sanctions of religion, custom, and authority, could no longer resist the temptations of unrestrained individualism [. . .]” (2).

time, and it is a fear that Howells addresses in this novel, exploring it as both cause and effect.<sup>8</sup>

For Howells, the question of morality, in conjunction with duty, only contributes to the vexed connection between realism as a mode of representation and divorce as a current event and topic for his novel. Howells, socially, was something of a traditionalist when it came to morality, but as a realist he wanted to convey a plausible rendition of the modern moment, a moment when such traditional values were in flux.

His traditional sense of morality largely stemmed from his father's Swedenborgian principles. As his biographer Edwin Cady observes, "The conviction that spiritual love and good works save – where self-concern and love of this world damn – he never escaped" (21). We see this especially through his depiction of Ben Halleck and his family, who aim to engage in "spiritual love and good works," which contrasts sharply with Bartley, who is largely motivated by his own "self-concern." Howells's interest in "good works," rather than "self-concern," is one that is reminiscent of Victorian ideology regarding the link between the home, family life, and the community. Inherent in this ideology is a belief in an ordering foundation of sorts that directly conflicts with his aesthetic goals of dismantling such hierarchies to achieve commonality. As Morgan notes, "Howells's antifoundational openness to the modernizing social order is haunted by a longing for a foundational ethos of social care" (54). This longing for a foundational

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<sup>8</sup> William L. O'Neill, in *Divorce in the Progressive Era*, discusses the connection between morality and marriage, observing that "By the middle of the nineteenth century, Anglo-American society had formulated a moral code based on three related principles – the permanency of marriage, the sacredness of the home, and the dependence of civilized life upon the family" (89). Elaine Tyler May, in *Great Expectations*, also offers a discussion of morality in relation both to the Victorian code and the changing family unit (58).

ordering system of the past stands in juxtaposition with his radical move away from traditional literary genres.<sup>9</sup>

It is a longing shaped by the sense of morality that informs both his work ethic and social concerns. In *Criticism and Fiction*, Howells claims that “no conscientious man can now set about painting an image of life without perpetual question of the verity of his work, and without feeling bound to distinguish so clearly that no reader of his may be misled between what is right and what is wrong, what is noble and what is base, what is health and what is perdition, in the actions and the characters he portrays” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 48). It is evident here that Howells felt “bound” to his audience (and to society). He wanted to distance himself from what he felt often “weaken[ed] the moral fibre,” and in this novel he imagines divorce as one of the contributing factors (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 47). Divorce, as this novel suggests, presented a conflict that Howells could not control or reconcile his divergent views on, and this conflict is projected onto the crippled Halleck.

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Hailing from one of Boston’s older families, Halleck is associated with the upper class and the traditional. He is wealthy, well-educated, and well-travelled. He is from a prominent and respected family of “plain people” who “don’t like to change,” a family of “solid citizens” with a good name (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 147, 148). The elder Hallecks, we learn, were both of the village, rather than the city, and despite securing wealth and social respect, they remain detached in Boston from the more fashionable set.

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<sup>9</sup> In *Divorce: An American Tradition*, Glenda Riley notes that many supporters of divorce, especially those who regarded marriage as a “contract,” viewed the dissolution of the family unit as a “symptom,” rather than a cause.



As the narrator explains, “They were of faithful stock, and they had been true to their traditions in every way” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 148). They are a family that has largely stood aloof from modernization and from the cultural and economic shifts that led to changes in the family structure and more largely in society itself as the Victorian code, which located the family as the moral foundation in society, began to break down. This emphasis on tradition and faithfulness focuses our attention on a stable, traditional marriage, or family unit, to suggest a connection between the family’s strong, or solid, roots and Halleck’s desire to do what is ethically and morally right for the good of others.

To more firmly establish him within the genteel tradition, Howells locates Halleck within the world of Boston. In *The Immense Complex Drama: The World and Art of the Howells Novel*, George C. Carrington, Jr., identifies several different types of Bostonians depicted in the novel, explaining that “On the high social level, where morality can be backed up with prestige and power, are the Hallecks, representing the solid mercantile class” (73). This “solid mercantile class” is reminiscent of a time when society afforded men a “solid” ground on which to base their identities, a time when those holding “prestige and power” served as the “custodians of culture” (Lears xvi). It also calls to mind Howells’s investment in solidity, given the apparent ephemerality of real life.

Halleck is, to use a term set forth by Cleveland Amory, a “Proper Bostonian.” According to Amory, “Proper Bostonian Society [. . .] is nineteenth-century commercial Society, resting on the wealth garnered by nineteenth-century merchants” (Cady, *The Road to Realism* 129). The subject of Proper Bostonians is one that Howells had addressed before, but it is important here in conjunction with the impact of divorce on shifting gender ideologies and class hierarchies. As May observes, “Several studies locate

the seeds of Victorian culture on the East Coast, in the affluent segments of the urban population in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. [. . .] At the upper strata emerged a group of well-to-do merchants and professionals. [. . .] Individuals born into this tradition became leaders of the institutions that set the norms for the nation” (16). Halleck, as a Proper Bostonian, or a member of the “upper strata,” is “born into this tradition” that was, by the 1880s, losing its cultural force. Halleck demonstrates an awareness of these changes when, in speaking of Boston, he says, “‘It’s more authentic and individual, more municipal, after the old pattern, than any other modern city. [. . .] Even Boston provinciality is a precious testimony to the authoritative personality of the city. Cosmopolitanism is a modern vice, and we’re antique, we’re classic, in the other thing” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 153-154). By using the pronoun “we,” Halleck aligns himself with the city of Boston, stressing that both he and the city are “classic” and “authentic,” drawing a stark contrast between the past, or the “old pattern,” which he suggests is genuine and real, and a more “cosmopolitan” modernity, which he associates with “vice.” We can link “authenticity” here to an older version of manhood defined in large part by production, rather than consumption, while his use of the word “antique” affirms that the tradition with which both he and the city are affiliated belongs to an obsolete past, one that had previously held an “authoritative” stance.<sup>10</sup>

In previous years, manhood had been characterized by a sense of stability that was lacking during the latter part of the 1800s when divorce rates were on the rise and when men were being thrust into the competitive arena of the marketplace. As Kimmel explains,

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<sup>10</sup> Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* describes the upper class gentleman as living a life of conspicuous leisure.

Manhood had earlier meant economic autonomy – control over one’s own labor, cooperative control over the labor process, ownership of the products of one’s labor. It had meant political patriarchy – the control of domestic and political life by native-born white men whose community spirit and republican virtue was respected in small-town life. And it had meant the freedom symbolized by the west – vast, uncivilized, primitive – where men could test and prove their manhood away from the civilizing influence of women. (19)

These earlier versions of manhood, including the one embodied by Halleck, were marked by a sense of “control” and “freedom” that began to wane amidst emergent economic and industrial shifts that took men away from the home and contributed to the emergence of the ideology of separate spheres. As Howells indicates within this novel through his depiction of Bartley, divorce is one such shift that seemingly offered a means of granting that lost sense of control and freedom as it fostered a literal separation “from the civilizing influence of women.” Howells thus depicts the courtroom where divorce proceedings took place as an arena where men like Bartley could project their masculinity.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, he imagines divorce as a social threat to that older version of inner-directed manhood embodied by Halleck, who falters when thrust into this arena and who continues to waver over the subject and his attitude toward it, even at the end of the novel. With Halleck, we see what is lost in the shift from production to consumption, a shift, as Kimmel notes, that was accompanied by a shift in definitions of what it meant to be a man – “from *manhood*, that inner directed autonomous American producer, to *masculinity*, the set of qualities that denoted the acquisition of gender

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<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Travis, in *Wounded Hearts: Masculinity, Law, and Literature in American Culture*, more fully addresses how the courtroom can function as a “battlefield.” In doing so, she, like Willam M. Morgan, traces the relations to sentimentalism. More specifically, she argues that “Howells believes that American literature and culture will be remasculinized and reinvented when men reclaim a domain of injury that many readers and critics schooled in stereotypes about the sentimental novel think the singular property of women: injured emotions” (53). While she makes a valid point, we have to question Bartley’s projected sincerity, especially in light of his false claim of abandonment. Meanwhile, Halleck continues to suffer emotional duress and never makes any public claims.

identity” (21).<sup>12</sup> Whereas manhood had previously been defined in opposition to childhood, masculinity came to be defined primarily in opposition to femininity.

Howells thus presents Halleck as both infantilized and effeminate to show the figure of the gentleman as being in a steady state of decline. Like the landed gentry of older times, Halleck, for the duration of the novel, remains with his parents in the house where he lived as a child, but he never marries and as a result never takes over his father’s role as domestic patriarch. His mother repeatedly bemoans this fact by proclaiming, “I wish Ben had married,” thereby revealing her own view that in some ways he has failed to carry on the tradition of his family (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 147). Because of this perceived failure to engage in “adult responsibilities” of this nature, his mother continues to view him as child-like, which further aligns him with that older version of manhood that had become an anomaly in Howells’s present day, as demonstrated by Halleck’s ineffectualness.

This view of Halleck as child-like is one that other characters in the novel share as well, including Marcia, the woman he loves. During her frequent visits to the Halleck home, for example, we learn that she and Mrs. Halleck would often “talk of their children, and in their community of motherhood they spoke of the young man as if he were still an infant” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 180). Halleck thus remains a perpetual “infant” in their eyes, leading them to regard him as someone in need of care, rather than

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<sup>12</sup> William M. Morgan, in *Questionable Charity*, positions “manliness,” a term which he explains “connotes a civilized, rational, and virtuous disposition usually associated with a genteel Christian ethics,” against “masculinity,” “characterized as a bodily construction of male identity shaped especially by the martial, passionate, and conquering virtues that Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Roosevelt, and other advocates of frontier mythology and imperialist history emphasized as national traits” (4). Gail Bederman, in *Manliness and Civilization*, comments on this further explaining that the word “ ‘Masculine’ thus existed as a relatively empty, fluid adjective – devoid of moral or emotional meaning – when the cultural changes of the 1890s undermined the power of ‘manliness’ ” (18).

as a self-sufficient man who is able to care for himself. Halleck's father expresses a similar regard for his son when he explains to Bartley that Halleck has "been a good while settling down," having tried his hand at his father's profession, having schooled himself for both the church and the law, and having taken off to South America to teach, only to return a short while later (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 146). It quickly becomes evident that Halleck's failure to meet parental or societal expectations leads him to feel like an outcast who is not able to find his place in the modern world.<sup>13</sup> He attributes this to the "sacrifice" he made for his parents, the giving up of "his boyish dreams of Harvard" to attend the college his parents wanted him to attend in their efforts to prepare him for the church. He "submitted," we learn, and he felt that this "put him at odds with life" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 148). As he tells his sister Olive, he felt that this decision prevented him from getting in with the "right set" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 148). The ideas of submission and "sacrifice" are ones that we typically associate with the feminine. This is an association that Howells delineates throughout to more accurately (and realistically) show how society at this time regarded this figure as enfeebled and effeminate.

Marcia, for instance, thinks of Halleck as "sickly," as being weak and enervated (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 180). His mother too acknowledges this and expresses admiration for the way in which he bears his lot. She explains that "He was the brightest and strongest boy that ever was, till he was twelve years old. [ . . . ] that's what makes me

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<sup>13</sup> This is a failure that parallels the "unfulfilled expectations" that many historians and sociologists, including May, have identified as a primary cause of divorce (11). Glenda Riley makes this same observation, noting that "the changing nature of the patriarchal family, rising expectations of marriage, and inequalities in relationships between husbands and wives also created marital tensions and divorce was often the result" (5). While Halleck does not get divorced, his inability to meet these expectations further drives him out of the dominant order and pushes him, or the figure of the gentleman which he represents, to the margins.

wonder at the way the child bears it!” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 180). Halleck again is referred to as a “child,” and tellingly his mother grieves that “he will always be a cripple” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 180). The crippled Halleck thus becomes emblematic of the crippled state of the gentleman and of his inability to ground his identity in ways that he had done before. It is important to note that Halleck used to be among the “brightest and strongest,” a position we might liken to the one held by the gentleman, or domestic patriarch, in previous years before he had come to be associated with weakness, enervation, and idleness.

Howells demonstrates this by depicting Halleck as being too weak to offer others much help, though he does try. One occasion when we see Halleck’s attempt despite his weakness (and the sense of failure that accompanies it) occurs when Marcia arrives at the Halleck’s garden with her baby. At her arrival, Halleck rushes to help her get the carriage over the steps and in the gate. The narrator describes how “He limped hastily down the walk to help her, but she had the carriage in the path before he could reach her, and he had nothing to do but to walk back at its side as she propelled it towards the house” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 177). This makes him feel worthless, and he even comments to Marcia, ““You see what a useless creature a cripple is”” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 177). Being “useless” is equated here with being not-gentlemanly, and it’s significant that Halleck does not even refer to himself as a man, but as a “creature” who has “nothing” to offer. Being “useless” pushes this figure “into the realms of the

non-men” in the eyes of others, a move that Howells as a professional author wanted to avoid (Kimmel 14).<sup>14</sup>

This is a figure who has suffered a loss of power, which Howells on some levels attributes to his idle lifestyle, to his constant drifting and inability to settle. As Freeman observes, “Halleck exudes something of a romantic, old-world, European gentility, which has no power in modern America” (32).<sup>15</sup> Halleck’s faltering sense of autonomy, or lack of power, is made evident by his constant appeals to the lawyer Atherton for advice and guidance. After finishing law school, for example, he approaches Atherton to ask, ““Don’t you think it would be a good time for me to give up the law? [. . .] Now, honestly, do you believe I’ve got the making of a lawyer in me?”” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 262). He exhibits weakness by appealing to Atherton for authoritative advice. In response, Atherton replies, ““I’ve thought that, if your heart was really set on the law, you would overcome your natural disadvantages for it; but if the time ever came when you were tired of it, your chance was lost; you never would make a lawyer” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 262). In this passage, Atherton admits what Halleck already knows – that he lacks a “natural” advantage for the law – and that in addition to this he lacks the desire, or ambition, to succeed as a lawyer, a traditionally masculine profession. As Warren Hedges asserts, in this novel, “manliness and character are equated with the law. Ben Halleck’s friend Eustace Atherton and Marcia’s father, Squire Gaylord, are the only men in the novel who hold firmly to their principles without doubt or hesitation, and both

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<sup>14</sup> Gail Bederman explains how some “men believed they could revitalize manhood by opposing excessive femininity,” which contributed to this push (16).

<sup>15</sup> Although Freeman, in *Love American Style: Divorce and the American Novel, 1881-1976*, acknowledges Howells’s portrayal of Halleck (along with Kinney) as “ineffective, emasculated men of ideals,” she too, like so many previous critics, simply regards Halleck as a “type,” as “a figure of the settled old world of the East.” She goes on to identify him largely as a “representative [. . .] of the limitations of European literary romanticism” (32).

of them are lawyers” (xx).<sup>16</sup> This firmness suggests a solid sense of manhood or masculinity. Unlike Halleck, who has “wasted two years’ time” in law school, these men expend no wasted effort, with waste being equated with idleness and its subsequent associations with the feminine and a life of leisure (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 262).

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Howells links Halleck’s effeminacy and emotional weakness to his idealistic and romantic impulses – impulses that Howells regarded as potentially dangerous in both fiction and real life. These are impulses that make themselves apparent early on and prevent Howells from fully sympathizing with this figure. Upon first meeting Halleck, we learn that he has had his heart set on an “unknown charmer,” on a woman in a photograph whom he has never met (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 150). This “unknown charmer,” we later find out, is Marcia. As Freeman notes, this photo functions as “a token of his ideal woman, ideal not only because of her beauty but because she was pure image, unattainable and unknowable” (32). When Marcia becomes a reality in his life, he continues to cling to that idealistic vision, and Howells suggests that this ultimately contributes to his downfall.

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<sup>16</sup> Brook Thomas, in *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* discusses contractual law, asserting that “As works of realism explore the possibility of presenting a world in which people are bound together contractually, they bring us to its limits” (6). In this book, he identifies contract as promising “equality of opportunity,” an “equitable social harmony that has been achieved through a network of immanent and self-regulating exchanges rather than a social order imposed artificially from above” (2-3). He also goes on to discuss that contract depends on “the sanctity of promising itself,” that it “gives a contractual society a moral foundation that results not from preconceived notions of status but from the duties and obligations that individuals impose on themselves in their dealings with other members of society” (3). This notion of contract helps us to better understand Howells’s conflicted attitude toward Halleck, for Howells’s realist principles are shaped by a desire for equality and a “moral foundation” based on duty, rather than one shaped by status.



When Halleck initially meets Marcia's child, for example, he has an almost violent inward reaction from which he never fully recovers. The narrator describes how he

looked at her with strong self-disgust [. . .]. There is something in a young man's ideal of women at once passionate and ascetic, so fine that any words are too gross for it. The event which intensified the interest of his mother and sisters in Marcia had abashed Halleck; when she came so proudly to show her baby to them all, it seemed to him like a mockery of his pity for her captivity to the love that profaned her. [. . .] Little by little his compassion adjusted itself to the new conditions; it accepted the child as an element of her misery in the future, when she must realize the hideous deformity of her marriage. His prophetic feeling of this, and of her inaccessibility to human help here and hereafter, made him sometimes afraid of her, but all the more severely he exacted of his ideal of her that she should not fall beneath the tragic dignity of her fate through any levity of her own. Now, at her innocent laugh, a subtle irreverence, which he was not able to exorcise, infused itself into his sense of her. (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 178)

At this point in the novel, Halleck's intense emotional struggle begins to take shape. Marcia's baby is a reality that punctures his ideal, prompting his own "self-disgust" at his reaction. By presenting him in this way, Howells indicates that "self-disgust" is a realistic correction to such idealizing tendencies, but Howells presents Halleck as being too weak to act any differently. Halleck pities Marcia for "her captivity to the love that profaned her" and is adamant that "she should not fall" by any doing of her own, thereby revealing his adherence to an older code positing that manhood involved acting as protector. Marcia, however, faithfully remains at her husband's side, a quality that Halleck seemingly finds attractive, even more so considering that she remains in a marriage that Halleck regards as a "deformity." Halleck puts Marcia on a pedestal and worships her with "a subtle irreverence" characteristic of dated Victorian ideology. He makes a

distinction between the tangible, regarded as base, and the ideal to which he clings but cannot grasp. Howells, thus, in a parallel move, infuses this scene with a subtle critique of Halleck's views by appropriating the melodramatic language that we might find in a sentimental or romance novel, suggesting that such idealistic visions can have detrimental effects.

To better illustrate this point, Howells offers a glimpse in *A Modern Instance* of the potential effect that novels can have on readers, simultaneously distancing himself from the romantic and idealistic Halleck and the type of literature that he viewed as harmful (and dated) for its idealism and elitism. We learn, for example, that many of Halleck's views regarding women have come from the popular novelists, which Howells cautions against because of the "idle lies" they often contain. We see this shortly after Halleck takes a drunk Bartley home to Marcia. Halleck, as he explains to Atherton, finds himself more upset by this event than Marcia, primarily because the event does not upset Marcia to the extent that he presumes it should. He thus pleads to Atherton, "Oh, but generalize! From what you know of women as Woman, what should you expect? Shouldn't you expect her to make you pay somehow for your privy to her disgrace, to revenge misery upon you? Isn't there a theory that women forgive injuries, but never ignominies?" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 204). Halleck's agony overwhelms him, and Howells suggests that it stems from his high ideal of "woman," from unrealistic expectations that have led to disappointments. This incident in Halleck's eyes is an "ignominy" and a "disgrace" because Marcia treats Bartley's behavior, which he regards as shamefully disgraceful, as merely injurious. What makes it worse in his eyes is that he has been made privy to a domestic event which he regards as private.

Howells, with his depiction of Halleck's dramatic reaction to the way in which Bartley has deviated from Victorian code in his failure to fulfill his duty as husband, demonstrates how the effects of divorce can extend beyond the private realm of the home and into society. In her history, May explains that "Sex-role expectations were clearly defined – everyone knew how a good wife should behave and what a good husband should do. Serious deviations from these basic obligations could lead to domestic upheaval" (27). Unlike the modern personality Bartley, Halleck finds himself unable to adapt to the shifts in society, such as changing expectations that historians have identified as a factor contributing to the increase in divorce. We thus see here a glimpse of something that Howells values in the antiquated Halleck, and Howells's own struggle to reconcile conflicting aesthetic and social priorities becomes even more apparent.

As a result, the minor character Halleck suffers more from this experience than Marcia, enabling Howells on one level to achieve his vision of common humanity, or solidarity, in which members of different social groups share a similar experience (Kaplan 22). There is no doubt that both Marcia and Halleck are hurt by Bartley's behavior – they are both hurt, however, to a different degree, and while Howells's vision of commonality recognizes difference, it also depends on transcending that difference to achieve what Kaplan calls "a communal consensus about the way things are" (23). Marcia's and Bartley's different perceptions of the situation emphasize the fragmentation that is rendered thematic by the subject of divorce, and this presents Howells the realist with complications that materialize in his presentation of Halleck.

Howells's attitude toward Halleck remains complicated as he attempts to maintain an objective realist point of view towards this character. We see this when, in response to

Halleck, Atherton assumes the voice of reason, sounding like a proponent of Howellsian realism when he explains with an air of authority, ““That’s what the novelists teach, and we bachelors get most of our doctrine about women from them. [. . .] We don’t go to nature for our impressions; but neither do the novelists, for that matter. Now and then, however, in the way of business, I get a glimpse of realities that make me doubt my prophets” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 204). In this passage, Halleck is presented as being in need of guidance, and Atherton aims to give it to him by disassociating himself from these so-called “prophets,” or novelists, who paint false “impressions” about life, about women. He draws a contrast between these “impressions” and the “glimpse of realities” that business affords him, and Howells in turn draws a contrast between his own writing and that of these false “prophets.” By positioning his own writing as superior, as productive work offering truths about life rather than falsely idealized visions, he grants himself an elite sense of authority that he simultaneously resisted.

As Halleck’s idealism is punctured, his struggle becomes more intense, prompting him to ruminate on the sanctity of marriage and the source of his grief. When Atherton says, “An unhappy marriage isn’t the only hell, nor the worst,” Halleck pauses to ask, “What could be a worse hell than marriage without love?” Atherton responds, “Love without marriage” (Howells *A Modern Instance* 208). This comment strikes a chord with Halleck, who suffers from his unrequited love for Marcia. It is at this point that Halleck comes to realize the truth of Atherton’s words. The narrator describes how Halleck, upon leaving Atherton, “wished to rehabilitate in its pathetic beauty the image which his friend’s conjectures had jarred, distorted, insulted; and he lingered for a moment before the door where this vision had claimed his pity for anguish that no after serenity could

repudiate” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 208). What Atherton does is open Halleck’s eyes to the reality of the situation, a move which parallels Howells’s attempts as a realist to present the truth, rather than the ideal.

The fact that we can better align Howells here with Atherton only reinforces the idea that Howells’s realist principles prevent him from fully sympathizing with this romantic and idealistic character. While Halleck continues to fight for his romantic belief, this realization does indeed break his “serenity,” leaving his idealistic vision “jarred, distorted, insulted.” Thus, Halleck struggles, and his struggles are marred by a sense of failure. As Morgan observes, “Howells rejects the heroic, unfragmented, and neoromantic fictions of masculinity disseminated throughout the 1880s and 1890s” to “suggest that manhood is more acutely defined by its internal contradictions, moral conflicts, and social failures than as a culturally unifying, nation-building myth” (23). Howells’s construction of Halleck’s masculine identity is thus shaped and informed by his aesthetic principles. In depicting Halleck as flawed, Howells presents him as more than just an idealized type, showing us instead man in his complexity and accurately demonstrating how the genteel tradition with which Halleck is associated was losing its cultural authority.<sup>17</sup> This is a tradition that Howells, as a realist, resisted, given its contemporary associations with a leisured lifestyle, but it is one that Howells the moralist found attractive. It is a tradition in which Howells locates a moral force, or power, which he finds lacking in modern society.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Howells discusses complexity of character in *Criticism and Fiction* (15-16).

<sup>18</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, in *No Place of Grace*, discusses the relation between leisure, idleness, and femininity, identifying as a “concern” the “apparent result of feminization: a decline of vital energy in art and life” (104). Meanwhile, Amy Kaplan, in viewing realism as a “strategy,” notes that “To call oneself a realist means to make a claim not only for the cognitive value of fiction but for one’s own cultural authority [. . .]”

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In a review of Hamlin Garland's work, Howells writes, "I like being in the company of a man [. . .] who believes that wrongs can really be righted, and that even in our depraved conditions, which imply selfishness as the greatest personal good, teaches that generosity and honesty and duty are wiser and better things" (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 263). Here, Howells affirms a belief in the very principles that he felt divorce and other modernizing trends threatened -- principles that he instills in the gentlemanly figure Halleck.

Biographer Cady confirms that Howells's definition of the gentleman was in fact linked to morality. In speaking of Howells's time in Venice, Cady says that Howells felt it "had enabled him to complete, by his own definition, 'the education of a gentleman (by which I do not mean a person born to wealth or high station, but any man who has trained himself in morals or religion, in letters, and in the world)'" (Cady 112). The "gentleman" here, by definition, is associated with a firm sense of "morals," which helps to explain the sympathy with which Howells presents Halleck in this novel. Moreover, the gentleman is also linked with both men of letters and men of religion -- two types of men who by the 1880s had experienced a loss of authority and were increasingly being viewed as effeminate. As Kimmel observes, the crisis in masculinity prompted men to "replace the inner experience of manhood -- a sense of security that radiated outward from the virtuous self into a sturdy and muscular frame that had taken shape from years of hard physical labor -- and transform it into a set of physical characteristics obtained by hard work in the

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(13). In previous years, authority and power resided within "the home and the community," as Debra Ann MacComb observes (4). Similarly, "manliness," popular in previous years, "comprised all the worthy, moral attributes which the Victorian middle class admired in a man" (Bederman 18).

gymnasium. The ideal of the self-made man gradually assumed increasingly physical connotations, so that by the 1870s, the idea of ‘inner strength’ was replaced by a doctrine of physicality and the body” (21-22).<sup>19</sup>

The crippled Halleck lacks the physique that many strove to attain during this time. Instead, he focuses heavily on his “inner experience” and strives to be “virtuous” by engaging in good works. Despite his detestation for Bartley, Halleck loans the man money, he takes him home when he is drunk to save the couple’s reputation, and perhaps most significantly he accompanies Marcia to Indiana to stand by her during her divorce trial. Granted, his actions are partially motivated by his love for Marcia, but these actions are admirable in that he attempts to fulfill his perceived duty and to engage in good works even though doing so contributes to the immense pain that he already feels.

Eble goes so far as to identify Halleck as “the most insufferable characterization of goodness that Howells allowed himself to create” (82). His marked moral awareness and desire to do good are qualities that many of the other characters lack, and Howells suggests that this stems from a strong parental unit rooted in a tradition that he felt divorce threatened. Marcia, for example, received little guidance from her parents and has as a result “been left too free in everything” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 183). Moreover, her husband has little to offer her in the way of instruction, and so she looks to the Hallecks for guidance, reiterating all the while that Ben and his family are “good

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<sup>19</sup> Amy Kaplan comments further on the distinction between character and personality in *The Social Construction of American Realism*, asserting that personality depends on projection; whereas, character radiates from within. She goes on to say that “In contrast to character, personality is not a moral category, but one suitable to mass society, in which the key evaluation of selfhood is not whether one is good or bad but whether one is known or unknown, a somebody or a nobody” (36).

people” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 186). Olive even tells Ben that Marcia “worships” him (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 257).

While Howells’s aesthetic preferences prevent him from doing the same, he does admire this figure’s principled way of life, or his character, a quality that emanates from within. In the nineteenth century, the term character “carried the moral connotations of personal integrity” and “presumed the existence of an inner core of an essential self that could be consolidated and expressed through actions.” Kaplan goes on to explain that “Howells implicitly associates character with his conception of writing as production and opposes it to the fanciful nature of fiction as idle consumption” (24). We thus begin to see that what Howells values in this older version of manhood embodied by Halleck are qualities that inform his work ethic and his commitment to what he regards as his social responsibility. These are the same qualities that shape his sympathetic portrayal of Halleck, who, though he is unable to adopt the physical appearance that characterized masculinity, can be a gentleman in spirit or essence. In speaking of his lame leg, for instance, Halleck’s mother explains that the boy who injured him never apologized or expressed any remorse. Nevertheless, she says, Ben “wouldn’t let us blame the boy [. . .]. Ben says that very few of us have the courage to face the consequences of the injuries we do, and that’s what makes people seem hard and indifferent when they are really not so” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 181). The fact that Halleck harbors no blame for this boy reveals an inner strength motivated by altruism, rather than the “self-interested individualism” that was steadily shaping society (O’Neill 45). He exhibits instead what we might call genteel behavior in his refusal to hold “hard” feelings and adopt a toughness akin to the rough-hewn version of masculinity that had become the ideal. This



newly emergent ideal (characterized by projecting personality rather than exuding character) is one that Howells firmly rejects – it does not square with his moral code or his investment, as a realist, in solidity, even though a physical notion of masculinity is in a superficial sense all about solidity and firmness.

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It is this innate moral sense and desire to do what is ethically right and morally correct that shape Halleck's wavering views on marriage and divorce. Halleck's agony over his attempts to justify divorce partly stems from the fear that he is acting out of self-interest, given his love for Marcia. Habegger takes note of the "strong ethical concern in American realism" that revolves around characters having "to make a difficult decision with important consequences for themselves and others" (109). He goes on to explain that "In realism the self was free, but just barely" (109). While Halleck is free to make his own choices, Howells reveals that in many ways he is bound to a tradition from which he cannot completely move away, despite his attempts. We see this when Halleck tries to voice an opinion in favor of divorce, reasoning, "'Then there are so many hells,' [. . .] 'where self-respect perishes with resentment, and the husband and wife are enslaved to each other. They ought to be broken up!'" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 208). Halleck, in this passage, voices a very liberal view that an unhappy marriage is a hell in which two people find themselves "enslaved," a view based on the idea that marriage depends on personal satisfaction, rather than a staunch commitment to duty.

Atherton, in response, articulates the conservative view, explaining, "'The sort of men and women that marriage enslaves would be vastly more wretched and mischievous

if they were set free. I believe that the hell people make for themselves isn't a bad place for them. It's the best place for them'" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 208). Atherton moralizes here, but his view is extreme. He expresses the beliefs of opponents who regarded divorce as "a scourge spreading across the nation" (Riley 84). His views are informed by Victorian ideology that identified clear and specific behaviors for each spouse so as to prevent "wretched" and "mischievous" behavior in society, behavior which many felt was grounds for a divorce.<sup>20</sup> This is the very behavior for which Halleck criticizes Bartley.

Thus Halleck remains troubled over the issue throughout the novel in much the same way that Howells does. The same sense of morality that shapes his firm belief in duty crafts his humanistic impulse. He regards Atherton's doctrine as "horrible" and doesn't understand "[h]ow a man with any kindness in his heart can harbor such a cold-blooded philosophy" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 208). Halleck recognizes that Atherton's position is extreme, and his humanitarian impulse, coupled with his love for Marcia, leads him to identify Atherton's view as "cold-blooded" for failing to consider the ramifications on the individual. His disappointment is evident. In seeking confirmation for a view that goes against everything that he has been taught, he makes his inner conflict known and reveals that his anger is partly self-directed. Before leaving in a huff, he says, "It serves me right for coming to you with a matter that I ought to have been man enough to keep to myself" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 208). Halleck reprimands himself and calls his own manhood into question. He realizes that he is not acting stoic, like a "man," but is instead making himself vulnerable to another.

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<sup>20</sup> Elaine Tyler May offers a discussion of a trend in the 1880s that led many to file for divorce on the grounds that their spouse engaged in unacceptable behavior.

In an attempt to confront what he regards as a weakness and to come to terms with his intense moral struggle, Halleck ultimately decides to flee Boston. Halleck, believing it a sin to love a married woman, again looks to Atherton for confirmation that going off is the right thing to do. Atherton, however, refuses to ask Halleck his “real motive” for going away, explaining, “I suspect that confession would only weaken you. If you told me, you would feel that you had made me a partner in your responsibility, and you would be tempted to leave the struggle to me. If you’re battling with some temptation, some self-betrayal, you must make the fight alone” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 265). The suggestion is that open discussion of such emotional troubles would only “weaken” Halleck and further align him with the feminine. Meanwhile, the “temptation” of course is his love for Marcia, which he regards as a sin, and this is a “temptation,” according to Atherton, that Halleck must “fight alone.” Howells suggests that to “fight” is the traditional masculine response, as does Atherton who goes on to advise, “You must trust to your principles, your self-respect, to keep you right” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 264). He places emphasis on being “right,” on taking the straight path and maintaining a firm sense of morals based on “principles” and “self-respect” – two characteristics on which that older version of elite manhood is based, characteristics that are jeopardized when Halleck is forced into taking a position on the subject of divorce.

Halleck, thus, in a moment that demonstrates his paralyzing dilemma, flees in an attempt to reconcile and make peace with his perceived wrongs, to find a firm ground on which to move forward and to regain his fragile sense of identity. This represents a desire on Halleck’s part to flee from reality rather than face the facts. As he tells Atherton, “No more principles and self-respect for me – I’ve had enough of them; there’s nothing for me

but to *run*, and that's what I'm going to do" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 265). As Halleck indicates, his "principles and self-respect" have done nothing but cause him misery, but it is precisely this that causes him to run as the alternative would be to stay and abandon both. We learn that in the weeks that followed,

Halleck's broken pride no longer stayed him from the shame of open self-pity and wavering purpose. Atherton found it easier to persuade the clinging reluctance of the father and mother, than to keep Halleck's resolution for him: Halleck could no longer keep it for himself. 'Not much like the behavior of people we read of in similar circumstances,' he said once. 'They never falter when they see the path of duty: they push forward without looking to either hand; or else,' he added, with a hollow laugh at his own satire, 'they turn their backs on it – like men! Well!'" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 265)

In this passage, Howells comments directly on those actions that others, including Halleck, view as unmanly. Halleck has failed to keep his "self-pity" to himself, and his purpose is described as "wavering," as lacking strength. He recognizes that he is "faltering," and he pities himself even more because of this perceived sense of failure. His laugh thus becomes "hollow," for he feels that he has failed to live up to the expectations that he has set for himself, thereby revealing an identity crisis that Howells examines in relation to the subject of divorce. In a long outpouring of emotion to Atherton, Halleck describes himself as an "abject dog" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 266). He further diminishes his identity as a man by drawing this comparison and reiterates that like a "dog," he needs guidance.

This guidance is exactly what Howells as an author is attempting to offer society. In some ways, he is, as Kaplan asserts, engaging "in an enormous act of construction to organize, re-form, and control the social world" by locating in characters like Halleck

qualities that he still admires despite their apparent obsolescence (10). Thus, in presenting Halleck as misguided, Howells reveals admiration for what is faltering in the modern world, admiration for what he suggests modern conditions make it difficult to maintain. We see this when Halleck, in speaking of his decision to run, tells Atherton,

‘I can assure you that I don’t feel any melodramatic vainglory. I know that I’m running away because I’m beaten, but no other man can know the battle I’ve fought. Don’t you suppose I know how hideous this thing is? No one else can know it in all its ugliness!’ He covered his face with his hands. ‘You are right,’ he said, when he could find his voice. ‘I suffer guiltily. I must have known it when I seemed to be suffering for pity’s sake; I knew it before, and when you said that love without marriage was a worse hell than any marriage without love, you left me without refuge: I had been trying not to face the truth, but I had to face it then. I came away in hell, and I have lived in hell ever since. I had tried to think it was a crazy fancy, and put it on my failing health; I used to make believe that some morning I should wake and find the illusion gone. I abhorred it from the beginning as I do now; it has been torment to me; and yet somewhere in my lost soul – the blackest depth, I dare say! – this same has been so sweet – it is so sweet -- the one sweetness of life – Ah!’ He dashed the weak tears from his eyes, and rose and buttoned his coat about him. ‘Well, I shall go. And I hope I shall never come back.’ (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 266-267)

In this outpouring of emotion, Halleck admits that he is “beaten.” His manhood is again called into question, and Howells suggests that Halleck’s unrealistic and romantic view of the situation has only contributed to his decision. At the same time, Howells recognizes that Halleck’s struggle stems in part from his fierce desire to do what is morally right, and his overwhelming sense of failure is one that Howells attributes to the figure of the gentleman. In recognizing that society has come to associate the gentleman with the feminine, Howells has Halleck cover his face and depicts him as having a difficult time finding his voice or that sense of autonomy on which manhood was based.

Halleck's realization that all of this was a "crazy fancy" on his part is almost too much to bear. Even his tears are described as "weak." He feels that his love for Marcia is a great sin, a blot that will forever mar him, but in going away he hopes that "the harm will be a little less" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 267). As Carrington notes, Halleck "sees himself as a sort of latter-day Dimmesdale, outwardly genteel and inwardly corrupt" (74).

Halleck feels torn and seeks a reconciliation of sorts with his former, more firmly moral self that we might liken to the type that Marcia hopes for with her husband but ultimately does not get.

Notably, Halleck's movement away from Boston, away from his troubles, occurs at the same point in the novel that Bartley and Marcia part ways. This simultaneity intimates Halleck's centrality as a character, and a focus on him further illuminates Howells's conflicting aesthetic and social priorities. With these parallel movements Howells suggests that running away (from our troubles and from our marriages) is not the answer, though he recognizes that sometimes that distance is needed in order to formulate a more objective (or realistic) outlook on the situation. By dramatizing the conflicts in this way, he offers us a look at a 'divorce' motivated by moral principles rather than selfish desires as we see is the case with Bartley. With Halleck, then, we become aware of an alternative route that Bartley could have taken, but this alternative is one that still makes Howells uneasy.

Consequently, he positions Halleck as an anachronism who is ineffectual, despite an acute sense of duty that Howells admires. The night before Halleck leaves, Marcia and Bartley have the fight that drives Bartley to abandon his wife. Marcia, not realizing that he has left, is scared to return home, and Halleck is called on to accompany her. He tells

Marcia that she “must go back to him’ [ . . . ] ‘He’s your husband!’” He pushed on again, saying over and over, as if the words were some spell in which he found safety, ‘You must go back, you must go back, you must go back!’ [ . . . ] ‘No man can be your refuge from your husband!’” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 268). Even though he continues to ‘push’ on, his confidence is lacking. He finds his love for Marcia overwhelming and has to force himself, as indicated through the repetition of his instructions, to place his societal duty above his own selfish desires. Howells’s use of the word “spell,” suggestive of a type of magical thinking marked by enchantment rather than logic, illuminates Halleck’s conflict. Despite his personal desires, he cannot let go of his moral principles, and in an effort to hold on to them he repeats by rote what he feels is slipping. After he successfully convinces Marcia to return to her home, her husband, and her duty, we learn that he “ran crookedly down the street, wavering from side to side in his lameness, and flinging up his arms to save himself from falling as he ran, with a gesture that was like a wild and hopeless appeal” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 268). Here, Howells connects Halleck’s “crooked” and “wavering” movements to his emotional wounds, wounds that stem from his love for a married woman, which he feels is a sin, and wounds that are worsened by his idealistic vision of the woman that he loves. This movement from “side to side” in some ways reflects the shifting grounds on which manhood stood, and his “wild and hopeless appeal” encompasses both the emotive and the language of the law. Howells again conjoins both the feminine and the masculine and identifies Marcia’s impending divorce as a threat to the outdated ideal of manhood that Halleck embodies, but of significance is that Howells’s depiction of this character is more conventionally feminine than otherwise. The word “appeal,” which is frequently used in sentimentalism,

connotes a suppliant to a higher patriarchal authority. Freeman observes that “Halleck’s unrequited passion for Marcia not only seems melodramatic but also renders him incapable of action and unsure of his own morality, effectively emasculating him” (32). His great escape is an effort on his part to recapture the principles of his youth, which he feels he is losing hold of, and to regain a firm ground on which to stand.

When Halleck returns from his two year sojourn, he finds that Bartley has abandoned Marcia, a realization that forces him to more fully confront his dilemma. His belief that marriage should be held sacred is complicated by his desire to take Bartley’s place as her husband. Thus, he tries to convince himself that he is now free to marry Marcia and that this desire is right and good, but this desire, as Howells illustrates, is tinged with romantic longings. As Halleck tells Atherton,

‘I can’t contemplate the effect of other people’s actions upon American civilization. When you ask me to believe that I oughtn’t to try to rescue a woman from the misery to which a villain has left her, simply because some justice of the peace consecrated his power over her, I decline to be such a fool. I use my reason, and I see who it was that defiled and destroyed that marriage, and I know that she is as free in the sight of God as if he had never lived. If the world doesn’t like my open shame, let it look to its own secret shame – the marriages made and maintained from interest, and ambition, and vanity, and folly. I will take my chance with the men and women who have been honest enough to own their mistake, and to try to repair it, and I will preach by my life that marriage has no sanctity but what love gives it, and that when love ceases marriage ceases, before heaven. If the laws have come to recognize that, by whatever fiction, so much the better for the laws!’ (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 289)

Here, Halleck affirms his belief that love is a necessary component of marriage, which is a belief that Howells does not deny, though Howells refuses to adopt an idealistic vision that love is all. In an 1897 interview, Howells said, “As things are, marriage is very



haphazard. . . . The belief that there is destiny in it – that there is only one person in the world you could truly love will not hold water” (Goodman 67). Howells, like Halleck, recognizes love as a worthy ideal, but as a realist he offers a more practical definition of marriage based on the idea that a successful marriage requires much more than love alone. As Riley observes, “love had a firm grip on the minds and hearts of mid-nineteenth-century Americans.” She goes on to describe how couples “expected love to bridge the gap between the separate worlds of men and women, to create a closeness between mates that would negate the dissimilarities in men’s and women’s values, attitudes, and activities. The presence of love would reconcile a man’s ties to the world outside the home with a woman’s ties to home and family. Ultimately, love would prevent spouses’ differences from creating discord in their marriages” (80). Love is described as a unifying force, and Halleck, in putting so much faith in the idea of love, voices what Howells considers an optimistic and idealistic belief.

Yet Howells admires Halleck’s concern for Marcia and his willingness to announce and take responsibility for his “open shame.” Halleck, however, cannot let go of his desire to play the role of knight in shining armor and rescue Marcia from what he regards as a crude brute. Bartley is nothing but a “villain” in his eyes, which further pits Halleck against Bartley and reinforces Halleck’s perceived goodness. Halleck, though, lacks the force and strength within himself to fully act on these beliefs, as demonstrated by his constant visits to Atherton for advice. We see this as he attempts to assert his “reason,” which throughout has been associated with the law and masculinity, and to present himself as something other than a “fool.” He quickly draws a contrast between “open” and “secret” shame, but he ties the two together in voicing his own, just as the

press during this time was blurring the boundaries between the two by publicizing and commercializing divorce and by making private familial matters public, thereby contributing to a shift in gender roles and calling identity (and the firmer foundations of the past) into question.

Howells depicts Halleck as feeling the brunt of this, as being beaten down. He cannot seem to reconcile his warring beliefs, and this pain is made even more acute by his inward focus on morality. We learn that his “meeting with the lawyer was the renewal of the old conflict on terms of novel and hopeless degradation. He had mistaken for peace that exhaustion of spirit which comes to a man in battling with his conscience; he had fancied the struggle over, and he was to learn now that its anguish had just begun. In that delusion his love was to have been a law to itself, able to loose and bind, and potent to beat down all regrets, all doubts, all fears, that questioned it; but the words with which Marcia met him struck his passion dumb,” for Marcia seeks sympathy from Halleck and turns to him for help in getting her husband back (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 290). Halleck, as a result, finds himself “exhausted.” He feels compelled to help her despite the fact that what she asks of him causes him great pain, which saps his energy and vitality, further situating him as an obsolete figure. Howells confirms this by using the word “delusion” to describe Halleck’s view, just as he further reinforces the notion that Halleck is regarded as weak and effeminate by describing how Halleck “fancied,” or imagined, his “struggle” to be done. Meanwhile, the “doubts” and “fears” to which Halleck refers evoke both the doubts and fears that men experienced during this time as they struggled to regain a lost sense of their manhood, and the doubts and fears that, as many historians and sociologists have noted, led to an increase in divorce rates, which is in turn

suggestive of a link between a faltering sense of identity and a faltering sense of marriage in society.

Halleck's struggle is manifested in his unwavering commitment to do what he believes is right, a commitment that Howells simultaneously admires and rejects. In response to Olive's musings that Halleck not disappoint Marcia, we learn that "Halleck listened in silence. He was indeed helpless to be otherwise than constant. With shame and grief in his heart, he could only vow her there the greater fealty because of the change he found in her" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 292). Halleck, instead of being strong and forthright in telling Olive that Marcia is the woman he loves, continues to suffer from his perceived "shame and grief." Yet, there is something both admirable and noble in the fact that Halleck won't or can't turn his back on Marcia. He wants to fulfill a "vow," to uphold a perceived duty to which he feels committed, a duty that Bartley dismisses. As a result, he becomes

doomed at every meeting to hear her glorify a man whom he believed a heartless traitor, to plot with her for the rescue from imaginary captivity of the wretch who had cruelly forsaken her. He actually took some of the steps she urged; he addressed inquiries to the insane asylums, far and near; and in these futile endeavors, made only with the desire of failure, his own reason seemed sometimes to waver. She insisted that Atherton should know all the steps they were taking; and his sense of his old friend's exact and perfect knowledge of his motives was a keener torture than even her father's silent scorn of his efforts, or the worship in which his own family held him for them. (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 292)

Halleck, instead of taking the lead, allows himself to be guided by his undying devotion to Marcia. He allows her, just as he allows Atherton, to instruct him on matters concerning his actions. His adoration of Marcia prevents him from fully making use of "his own reason," and Marcia's insistence that Atherton know all only provides him with

“a keener torture.” Halleck, as a result, becomes sick; his struggle takes a toll on his health, weakening him further.

Halleck comes to function as a model of a social order built on gentility and morality, and Howells, by vesting Halleck with so much symbolic significance, is in some ways deviating from his realist principles. As a demonstration of this conflict which he grapples with throughout, Howells depicts Halleck as going home in “broken health” after his encounter with Marcia. The narrator describes how he then “failed; he kept his room, and then he kept his bed; and the weeks stretched into months before he left it” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 292). Howells presents Halleck as being “broken” and “isolated” – two adjectives that we might use to describe the status of the gentleman in society at this time.

Worth noting is the fact that Howells himself endured a nervous breakdown of sorts in the midst of writing this novel, a breakdown that occurred at the point in the novel where Bartley leaves Marcia. Several critics have commented and theorized on this, with some suggesting that the idea was too much for him to handle.<sup>21</sup> While there is no way to prove this, the fact that it occurred is significant, and as Eble notes, “What the illness does confirm is the presence of tensions in Howells’s life quite at odds with the image of steadily increasing success that appears as its surface reality” (77). He goes on to describe how Howells, in a letter to Horace Scudder, wrote, “I think my nerves have given way under the fifteen years’ fret and substantial unsuccess” (Eble 77). In this

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Goodman, in *William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life*, Edwin H. Cady, in *The Road to Realism*, George C. Carrington, Jr., in *The Immense Complex Drama: The World and Art of the Howells Novel*, and Kenneth S. Lynn, in *William Dean Howells: An American Life*, are among some of those who address the illness that fell upon Howells in the midst of writing this novel. In speaking of this illness, Howells described how he spent “ ‘seven endless weeks’ in bed, emerging ‘only two or three years older than I was four months ago’ ” (Cady 208).

letter, Howells comments on some of the “tensions” that Eble muses on, namely that “tension” stemming from his desire for success as an author, as a literary man. The “fret” he suffered calls to mind the “fret” that plagues Halleck throughout the novel, the “fret” that leads him to feel like a failure on so many different levels.

In presenting Halleck as a failure, Howells reveals the effects that divorce can have on a character who epitomizes this residual form of masculinity and more broadly on tradition in general if, as seemed likely, it was not reclaimed. Atherton, in his discussion with Clara, confirms that Halleck could not act, could not encourage Marcia to get a divorce; rather, “he could only dream of doing it” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 302). Howells attributes this inability to Halleck’s principled way of life. Atherton goes on to explain,

When it came to the attempt, everything that was good in him revolted against it [. . .] But suppose a man of his pure training and traditions had yielded to temptation – suppose he had so far depraved himself that he could have set about persuading her that she owed no allegiance to her husband, and might rightfully get a divorce and marry him – what a ruinous blow it would have been to all who knew of it [. . .] if a man like Ben Halleck goes astray, it’s calamitous; it ‘confounds the human conscience,’ as Victor Hugo says. All that careful nurture in the right since he could speak, all that lifelong decency of thought and act, that noble ideal of unselfishness and responsibility to others, trampled under foot and spit upon – it’s horrible! (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 302)

In this passage, Howells comments directly on Halleck’s “unselfishness and responsibility to others,” which he felt was on the wane in society at this time. As Atherton says, Halleck, or the figure of the gentleman, is a man of “pure training and traditions” who is the product of “careful nurture.” Some of the qualities, though, that Halleck embodies, such as “unselfishness,” are those that had by this time become

associated with weakness, or the feminine, as had the notion of a “noble ideal.” This leads Atherton to declare, “it’s horrible!” and helps us to better understand those who regarded the decline of the gentleman, a figure which Howells admires, as a “ruinous blow.”

Halleck is a figure who recognizes the importance of a solid family structure. With this figure’s decline, Howells thus shows us the costs of divorce, demonstrating the extent to which the effects extend outward to society. Atherton explains, “it’s the implanted goodness that saves – the seed of righteousness treasured from generation to generation, and carefully watched and tended by disciplined fathers and mothers in the hearts where they have dropped it. The flower of this implanted goodness is what we call civilization, the condition of general uprightness that Halleck declared he owed no allegiance to. But he was better than his word” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 302-303). Atherton touches on the importance of the familial tradition, which divorce disrupts. He even goes so far as to say that “civilization” stems from this “condition of general uprightness” that was traditionally associated with manhood. Like so many of the other characters in the novel, he too places Halleck on a pedestal of sorts by suggesting that Bartley and Marcia know no better, but that Halleck, because of his upbringing, does. He affirms the importance of family and tradition for the good of the individual and society as a whole. This, as Atherton suggests, is the true order of things. He comments, “I hate anything that sins against order, and this whole thing is disorderly. [. . .] But we must bear our share of it. We’re all bound together. No one sins or suffers to himself in a civilized state – or religious state; it’s the same thing. Every link in the chain feels the effect of the violence, more or less intimately. We rise or fall together in Christian

society. [. . .] We keep on thinking of offenses against the common good as if they were abstractions” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 303-304). While Atherton voices an extreme view, it is a view that Howells partially affirms, especially the idea that everyone is “bound,” a word that evokes the union of two people in marriage and their responsibilities to each other and a word that Howells uses in speaking of the duty of the novelist. Further, Howells, in writing in the realist tradition, strove for the “common good” and was as a result wary of divorce, which as Atherton suggests could be considered “an act of wanton self-indulgence” (Lynn 265). In voicing his opinion, Atherton becomes representative of those who opposed divorce and who situated its rise with the emergence of individualism and selfish desires, a rise that upset both gender and class hierarchies, as Howells himself was aware. Thus, Atherton – and Howells to an extent – advocates the necessity of order in society, asserting that the costs of disorder, such as those associated with divorce, are too high.

Olive confirms this same desire for order and civility as she travels with her brother, Marcia, and Squire Gaylord to serve as witnesses at Marcia’s trial. Olive, who believes that they have “been called to this work,” tells Ben that “Our coming off, in this way, on such an errand, is something so different from the rest of our whole life! And I *do* like quiet, and orderly ways, and all that we call respectability! I’ve been thinking that the trial will be reported by some such interviewing wretch as Bartley himself, and that we shall figure in the newspapers. But I’ve concluded that we mustn’t care. It’s right, and we must do it” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 307). Here, Olive, like Atherton, identifies Halleck and the rest of her family with tradition, “respectability,” and “orderly ways.” She also demonstrates her own awareness of the moral implications associated with her

sense of duty by stressing that their involvement is “right,” yet she expresses a concern shared by Howells regarding the commercialization of divorces and the scandalous nature of the press. Susan Goodman notes that “Howells had a keen sense of privacy and propriety in an age that had not entirely disowned the rule that a lady’s name should appear in print only upon birth, marriage, or death” (154). This “sense of privacy and propriety” is one that the Halleck family shares. In having Olive voice the view that private matters should not be made public, Howells upholds a more conventional view of marriage that in part depended on, or reinforced, the traditional separation of public and private spheres. As Morgan explains, the realists like Howells held “deeply sympathetic responses to the foundational ethical systems of residual discourses” despite being largely “antifoundationalist” (8).

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This sympathetic response is apparent in Howells’s depiction of Halleck, who remains cognizant of the duty that Atherton advocates, though he no doubt is uncomfortable with the whole situation. With Halleck, who decides to accompany Marcia west, Howells offers us an alternative response to the situation that is nothing like Bartley’s. This movement westward reflects the increasing sense of mobility associated with divorce.<sup>22</sup> It also focuses our attention on the shifting grounds on which previously held beliefs and foundations stood, including that traditional view of manhood. By moving west, Bartley seeks freedom and a new life – he essentially attempts to reclaim what he perceives as a lost sense of manhood as so many men during this time did,

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<sup>22</sup> Mobility here can refer to the freedom from fulfilling the duties of husband and wife and literally the movement to other parts of the country by many seeking divorce. Glenda Riley discusses the rise of migratory divorces in *Divorce: An American Tradition*. Strict laws governing divorce (and in some cases outlawing it) in certain states prompted couples to move elsewhere to obtain the divorce they were seeking.



suggesting that Bartley somehow feels less masculine because of his marriage to Marcia. Here, Howells reveals the difference between the inner-directed and outer-directed man. Unlike Bartley who moves west in an attempt to free himself from the bonds of marriage and start a new life, Halleck's move west is accompanied by suffering because he is being thrust out of his orderly ways.

Halleck "shrank from knowing," for example, whether Marcia shares her father's plans for destroying and disgracing Bartley, and when Marcia comes to Halleck for advice on whether she ought to "fight him" as her father desires, Halleck responds "feebly and inadequately" that she should not feel so (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 307, 311). Howells once more equates Halleck with weakness or with "feeble" women and demonstrates that this association makes Halleck feel 'inadequate' for not possessing and displaying the strength for which he longs, a strength traditionally associated with manhood and virility. His condition contrasts sharply with the westerners who join them on the train. As the narrator says, "A different type of men began to show itself in the car, as the Western people gradually took the places of his fellow-travellers from the East. The men were often slovenly and sometimes uncouth in their dress; [. . .] they had not that eager and intense look which the Eastern faces wore; there was energy enough and to spare in them, but it was not an anxious energy" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 311). These westerners embody a different style of masculinity, one that is marked by a roughness, strength, and lack of anxiety, allowing Howells to draw a contrast between the gentleman, as represented by Halleck, and the rough-hewn ideal, confirming that the gentlemen of the east had been stricken with an anxiety in some ways similar to the anxiety that permeates this text.

Halleck, nevertheless, remains steadfast in his love. Driven practically to the brink of exhaustion, by the end of the novel, he comes to find that his romantic love for Marcia has been replaced by a different kind of love, one that we might characterize as “spiritual love.”<sup>23</sup> We learn, for example, that “her sorrow had unsexed her; only the tenderness of his love for this hapless soul remained in his heart, which ached and evermore heavily sank within him” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 313). Halleck, unlike the other men in the novel, is able to express sympathy and pity for Marcia, yet his undying love for her and her “sorrow” “unsexes” her; of significance is the fact that Halleck throughout remains somewhat “unsexed” in his inability to ground his manhood. He feels nothing but “tenderness” for Marcia, a quality that contrasts sharply with forcefulness and further positions him as soft, or effeminate. Halleck, we later learn, has been suffering from a “torturing stress” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 316). When they go to enter the courthouse, the narrator describes how Halleck “dragged lamely” behind Marcia’s father (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 317). Howells emphasizes Halleck’s slow movement, lameness, and lack of energy to show the effect of divorce on the traditional order, an effect that appeals to Howells’s desire for commonality and one that offends his refined moral sensibilities and the value he places in stability and adhering to one’s duty.

Hence, Halleck, the outsider, continues to suffer, and it his suffering that is most visible and most intensely probed. We see, for example, when Bartley requests an interview with Halleck, that Halleck finds it within himself to attend by drawing on his love for Marcia, even though it nearly does him in. He tells Bartley, “you owe some one

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Goodman observes that Howells’s “own marriage after the early years appears at times to have grown if not more testy, then companionable rather than passionate, and more studiously courteous [. . .] Howells found some truth in a generation that marriages pass from passionate love to hate and quarrels and then back to love of a more spiritual kind – assuming the man and woman remain true to their bonds” (154).

else a debt that no one can pay for you. We needn't waste words: what are you going to do to repair the wrong you have done the woman and the child --' He stopped; the effort had perhaps been too much" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 325). Halleck identifies Bartley's failure to fulfill his duty as a "wrong," and it's significant that he finds the strength within himself to stand up to the man. "The effort," though, was exhausting, almost more than he could handle – "too much." What makes this conversation even more difficult for Halleck to bear is that Bartley echoes some of his own sentiments, describing Halleck as a "good fellow" (thereby drawing a contrast to himself), and in reference to his marriage, reasoning, "if our marriage had become a chain, that we ought to break it" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 325). This echoes the opinion that Halleck earlier voiced to Atherton in an effort to justify his longing for Marcia, but inherent in this idea is an awareness of duty and the role that marriage plays in society. Bartley, in confirming that he is breaking the "chain" to Marcia acknowledges that he is breaking a "chain" to society, or at least to another human being to whom one is obligated, a recognition that arises in part from his movement westward. In order to abandon Marcia, he had to move; he could not go on living in Boston without her, and his reputation is now tarnished. He regards their marriage as restrictive and feels they "ought to be free." He goes on to encourage Halleck to ask for Marcia's hand in marriage once the divorce goes through, explaining, "as I understand the law, Marcia isn't bound in any way. I know that she always had a very high opinion of you, and that she thinks you are the best man in the world: why don't *you* fix it up with Marcia?" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 325). Bartley, in an effort to assuage his own conscience by handing his wife over to another man for her supposed well-being, denies that marriage holds any sanctity. When

Marcia finds out that they never formally declared their intention to one another, Bartley reasons, “We are married, right and tight enough; but I don’t know that there’s anything *sacred* about it” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 233).<sup>24</sup> His use of the words “right and tight” suggests that to him marriage, or duty even, is confining and restrictive, a discomfiting sentiment at the time that may help to account for Howells’s sympathetic attitude toward Halleck.

Unlike Bartley, who has no family and no established home, Halleck feels “bound” to his family and to his traditions, to a code. As Carrington observes, Howells moves away in this novel from the idea “that being ‘downright’ is a primitive and natural talent, toward the belief that it is the precarious product of a precariously balanced training and vision. Codes, then, are necessary, up to a point defined with difficulty; beyond that point lies trouble” (69). Halleck, no doubt, feels hemmed in by this “code” and his failure to live up to it in the way that he feels he should, which only increases his despair and further dislocates his tenuous sense of manhood. Despite the fact that he strives to do right, he continues to suffer from a series of losses. Carrington notes that “Earnest plainness and correctness of perception do not guarantee success or immunity in such a world. The whole muddled business is seen and presented by the satiric narrator, who shows us the absurdity, and even the monstrosity, of our expectations and standards” (69). While Halleck seeks both “success and immunity,” he does not achieve either, and he finds himself in a “muddled business” indeed.

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<sup>24</sup> Bartley tells Marcia that their marriage is not “sacred” because the pastor forgot to ask for “proof” of their intention to marry, and as a result Bartley did not provide it (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 363). This leads Marcia to proclaim that their marriage has been “tainted with fraud from the beginning” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 364).

What results is a loss of identity that Howells attributes on some levels to divorce. Divorce, in this novel, not only brings ruin to Halleck, but to Bartley as well. Bartley, we learn, is “driven into exile by the accidents of his suit for divorce” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 325). He is unable to pursue his career or make a home in that community where the divorce had been filed, and he is later killed after writing a scandalous story for the press. The fact that Howells literally removes him from the novel is significant. The divorce, which Bartley brings upon himself, and his subsequent write up of another divorce in a scandalous way, destroy his life and drive him out of the community. In making this move, Howells is affirming a connection, or a duty, rather, to one’s community and society. Marcia, meanwhile, returns to the home of her birth and becomes the lonely and self-effacing woman that her mother was, while Halleck “take[s] charge of a backwoods church” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 326). We learn that “In entering the ministry, he had returned to the faith which had been taught him almost before he could speak” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 327). He returns to the traditions of his youth, which Howells suggests have been ingrained in him by his family. In leaving the city for the country and in returning to a profession which he had previously rejected (and to a profession that was ebbing at this time), he resigns himself to the old ways in a move that further positions him as an anachronism in society. The narrator describes how

He did not defend or justify this course on the part of a man who had once thrown off all allegiance to creeds; he said simply that for him there was no other course. He freely granted that he had not reasoned back to his old faith; he had fled to it as to a city of refuge. His unbelief had been helped, and he no longer suffered himself to doubt; he did not ask if the truth was here or there, any more; he only knew that he could not find it for himself, and he rested in his inherited belief. He accepted everything [. . .]. He had known the terrors of the law, and he preached them to his people; he had

known the Divine mercy, and he also preached that. (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 327)

In essence, Halleck returns, or “retreat[s],” as Kaplan observes, to the traditions of his youth and to his “inherited belief,” and Howells uses the language of the court to demonstrate this and to stress the connection between the divorce trial and Halleck’s ensuing condition (38). Halleck does not “defend or justify this course”; rather, he simply drifts, a type of movement which reinforces that he still lacks a firm identity or a strong sense of his manhood, for he has no firm place on which to ground it. He recalls a “part of the man” he used to be, but does not pursue it any longer.

He does not achieve the ideal he longs for throughout, and by presenting him in this way Howells affirms his realist perspective. He imagines the divorce trial as the primary cause of Halleck’s decline, an idea that he furthers by referring to Halleck in the final pages of the novel as nothing more than “the lame man” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 327). He no longer has a name, a primary defining characteristic of traditional manhood. Like Marcia, he becomes “self-effaced,” which further associates him with the feminine.

The novel thus closes with an emphasis on shame and guilt, with Halleck still struggling to come to terms with his decision and with Howells still attempting to reconcile his views. It closes with “realism’s emphasis on failure, error, and helplessness” (Morgan 11). After the divorce trial, Halleck continues to seek advice from Atherton, reinforcing the notion that he is in some ways ‘helpless’ and in need of guidance to avoid additional “failure” and “error.” Atherton, for once, finds himself at a loss for words,

demonstrating that his previously held firm beliefs are also upset by the divorce. Halleck, to Atherton, admits,

I am turning to you now for help in a matter on which my own conscience throws such a fitful and uncertain light that I cannot trust it. [. . .] there are times when it seems to me at last that I have the right to ask her to be my wife. The words give me a shock as I write them; and the things which I used to think reasons for my right rise up in witness against me. Above all, I remember with horror that *he* approved it, that he advised it! . . . It is true that I have never, by word or deed, suffered her to know what was in my heart; but has there ever been a moment when I could do so? It is true that I have waited for his death; but if I have been willing he should die, am I not a potential murderer?" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 328)

In this letter to Atherton, Halleck reveals that he continues to suffer, and his desire to go against tradition gives him a great "shock," one from which he can hardly recoil. Unable to trust his own reason, he looks elsewhere for guidance, but what troubles him most is that the man he despises shares his same thought. Halleck wants to do what is "right" and good, but he in no way wants to be associated with Bartley, who in his opinion lacks any sort of moral sense. Overtaken by guilt, he even wonders if he is partially responsible for Bartley's death simply by wishing him dead. His despair, brought on by the conundrum that divorce poses, is evident.

This despair leads him to ask Atherton in that same letter, "She is free, now; but am I free? Am I not rather bound by the past to perpetual silence? There are times when I rebel against these tortures; when I feel a sanction for my love of her, an assurance from somewhere that it is right and good to love her; but then I sink again, for if I ask whence this assurance comes – I beseech you to tell me what you think. Has my offence been so great that nothing can atone for it? Must I sacrifice to this fear all my hopes of what I could be to her, and for her?" (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 328). The question turns to

freedom, a central idea to an understanding of marriage and divorce laws during this time, for most spouses, in seeking divorce, were seeking freedom from one another. However, it is Halleck here, not Marcia or Bartley, who is obsessed with freedom, and his concern speaks to the crucial role he plays in this novel. Halleck feels that this whole experience has left him less than “free”; in fact, he feels “bound,” and Howells again makes use of legal language to stress the connection to divorce and Halleck’s condition. Halleck is, we might say, committed to these values and finds that he cannot ‘divorce’ himself from his moral upbringing. As a realist, Howells too felt bound to his moral values, to society, and to his literary goals, one of these goals being freedom, freedom from previous literary forms and freedom as it relates to democracy (freedom from the old order). At the same time, he admires the duty and desire for stability that Halleck possesses. His inability to resolve these conflicting beliefs is illustrated by the “tortures” that continue to plague Halleck. Halleck “sinks,” rather than rising up, and Howells again conveys the idea that divorce only contributes to the decline of a particular type of manhood, even though Halleck is neither divorcer nor divorcée.

He instead functions as a representation for a way of life, and Howells, by depicting him as such, alludes to the effects of divorce on an elite group of men, inherently raising fears of a moral collapse that stem from his own social views concerning morality. Halleck feels as if he has committed a great sin, a great “offense,” so heavy does the burden of what is morally right and wrong weigh on his shoulders, the force that leads him to feel he must do the “right” thing. However, in the end, he questions whether he must continue to “sacrifice,” and with this question Howells further aligns the weakened Halleck with the feminine. Atherton is aware that Halleck is



“deifying” Marcia, an old concept that had become somewhat dated by this time and one that Howells critiques for its sentimentality. Atherton sums it up nicely when he describes how Halleck feels that “being in love with her when she was another man’s wife” is nothing more than “an indelible stain” from which he can never part. His guilt overtakes him, and he pays a price instead of “profit[ing] by a divorce” when he could, a move that Howells, on some levels, seems to support (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 329).

It is significant, though, that Howells gives Atherton, the lawyer, the last word in the novel and that Atherton, at this moment, falters in much the same way as Halleck has. Atherton ponders the situation and observes that “it isn’t a question of gross black and white, mere right and wrong; there are degrees, there are shades. There might be redemption for another sort of man in such a marriage; but for Halleck there could only be loss – deterioration – lapse from the ideal. I should think that he might suffer something of this even in her eyes--” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 329). Atherton comments directly on Halleck’s idealism, and Howells again suggests that such idealistic imagining is dangerous. Atherton even goes so far as to suggest that it might lead to further “loss” and further “deterioration,” but he overlooks the fact that Halleck has very little more of anything to lose. In pondering the situation at this moment, Atherton for the first time finds himself at a loss for words, and Howells ends the novel with Atherton saying with “a troubled sigh,” ““Ah, I don’t know! I don’t know!”” (Howells, *A Modern Instance* 329). Carrington, in commenting on the significance of Atherton’s closing remarks, notes that “The public condemnation of moral errors is thus itself partially condemned – partially, not wholly” (70). Howells, then, in true realist fashion, refuses to

take a side on this issue, but this refusal also reflects the impasse that he comes to in this text.

Howells ends the novel with the suggestion that divorce can be viewed as both cause and effect, and he is starkly aware that its effects extend outward to the same society which contributes to them. As Kenneth Schuyler Lynn notes, for example, the “tragedy” of this novel “originates in the failure of [Marcia’s] parents’ marriage” (258), and with Atherton’s moralizing Howells has us ponder what will become of Flavia, Marcia and Bartley’s child. In doing so, he brings the subject back to a sense of duty that we can associate with the genteel version of manhood that Halleck embodies. He is presented as not belonging, which enables Howells to ponder the gentleman’s place in modern society, suggesting that the gentlemanly figure is defined by characteristics and values that could perhaps stabilize the societal “threats” emerging in modern society, including divorce. Howells, however, because of his realist goals, cannot fully sympathize with or support this character and his dated values. Halleck thus functions as a central, rather than a minor, character, and in his depiction of this figure Howells attempts to come to terms with his own misgivings regarding current social and aesthetic trends, as demonstrated by Halleck’s shortcomings and indecision.

## CHAPTER 3

### FRACTURED FORMS, FRACTURED LIVES:

#### DIVORCE IN JAMES'S *WHAT MAISIE KNEW*

Published in 1897, nearly 15 years after Howells's *A Modern Instance* appeared, Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* demonstrates that divorce, in the intervening years, had only become increasingly prevalent and more acceptable. In his *Notebooks*, he describes how the idea for the story originated at a dinner party when one of those in attendance described a "situation" in which a child "was *divided* by its parents in consequence of their being divorced" (James, *Notebooks* 71). He observes that "The court, for some reason, didn't, as it might have done, give the child exclusively to either parent, but decreed that it was to spend its time equally with each – that is alternately" (James, *Notebooks* 71). What he finds most striking here is the "consequence" of divorce, the way in which a child is divided and objectified as a result. In recalling this incident, he notes that the court "didn't, as it might have done," act in the usual manner and grant one parent sole custody. In "Handing Over Power in James's *What Maisie Knew*," Jeff Westover explains that throughout the larger part of the 1800s, custody was typically granted to one parent: "English law traditionally considered the child to be a servant (and hence a possession) of the father," though a movement concerned with "the best interest of the child" led Parliament to modify the law in 1839, granting the mother custody in some cases (*n. pag.*). This modification led to further changes in the years that followed, and as Westover notes, "the action of the book occurs at a time when, although attitudes

were changing and these changes were reflected in the law, the application of new legal principles remained incomplete” (*n. pag.*). That the child spend an equal amount of time with each parent is thus a new arrangement indicative of a trend toward equality, or a shift in gender roles, that James addresses in the novel as another “consequence” of divorce. It is an arrangement that Westover asserts James critiques.<sup>25</sup>

Like Howells, James examines the effects of divorce at both the individual and social levels, and though his focus is on the effects of a child caught in the midst of a bitter dispute between her feuding parents, he too offers a glimpse of how divorce posed a threat to an increasingly marginal figure as well. We see this through his depiction of Sir Claude, a leisured and mild-mannered gentleman belonging to a class of aesthetes viewed as effeminate by an American culture increasingly given over to a cult of masculinity and by the European set as well.<sup>26</sup> This titled gentleman is presented as a sensitive soul who is both charming and good-looking, but we soon come to learn that his title is of questionable origins and that he is dreadfully fearful of women, so much so that it leads to a sort of paralyzed inaction on several occasions that recalls that of Howells’s Ben Halleck. When Maisie asks, for example, why Sir Claude married her mother, he replies, “Just because I *was* afraid” (James, *Maisie* 106). He goes on in this same passage to say to Maisie, “I *should* be in fear if you were older – there! See – you already make

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<sup>25</sup> Concern about the interest of children became a central focus in the divorce debates in both England and America. Writing in the early 1900s, Anna Garlin Spencer, in “Problems of Marriage and Divorce,” touches on the problem, commenting, “To force both parents to live together in a horrible travesty of home cannot give those defrauded children their rights. To hand them over first to one, and then to the other parent, in a mixed and conflicting influence and devotion, cannot make good the lack of the united care of two people who love them and love each other. To give them wholly to the one parent thought most fit for their care is still to leave them orphaned and desolate” (201).

<sup>26</sup> As Ronald L. Jackson and Maruali Balaji note in the introduction to *Global Masculinities and Manhood*, Europeans, like Americans, “began to rethink masculinity” [. . .]. Men were assumed to be aggressive and were therefore born to lead and conquer; passivity was unmanly and unmasculine” (23). Lawrence Stone, in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, briefly comments on changes in the family structure that occurred during the 1800s and beyond, noting the steady loss of patriarchal power (422-423).

me talk nonsense” (James, *Maisie* 106). In acknowledging his fears, he positions himself as weak, as being afraid of women and the power they wield over him. As Tessa Hadley observes, “*What Maisie Knew* is peopled by voracious women and weak men” (222). While Maisie is certainly not one of these “voracious women,” Sir Claude insinuates that Maisie is “already” old enough to elicit sexual, or in this case incestuous, desire, which he quickly dismisses as “nonsense,” a corrective indicating that he is aware of his own vulnerability. Chris Foss notes, “One in fact can make a strong case that the uncertain ‘fear’ Sir Claude experiences is a symptom of a male vulnerability which he is continually working to suppress” (*n. pag.*). This “vulnerability” is one that he exposes by claiming that Maisie “make[s]” him think such thoughts. It is a vulnerability that leads others to characterize him as soft or effeminate, for it stands in contrast to the hard masculinity that had become popular – even across the Atlantic -- by this time. By presenting him as fearful, effeminate, and inadequate, as possessing a title lacking a solid origin, James shows how the class of men that he represents had lost a certain sense of authority on which identity had been based in previous years, and in this novel he imagines the extent to which divorce contributes to this loss.

Divorce, as we know, posed a challenge to traditional values, gender hierarchies, and class structures. It upset the status quo. As a novelist writing in the realist tradition, James, like Howells, found himself drawn to the subject for its contemporaneity, but whereas Howells admired its democratic qualities, on both a social and aesthetic level, James was most attracted to the very quality that made Howells uneasy – its emphasis on difference. While Howells, with his aesthetic of the common, wanted to bridge difference, James felt that difference, or variety, was what granted the novelist his subject

matter -- hence his fondness for European culture, which he presents us with in this novel. As he says in his review of Hawthorne, "it takes such an accumulation of history and custom, such a complexity of manners and types, to form a fund of suggestion for a novelist" (James, *Hawthorne* 43). Divorce, thematically, granted him the "complexity," or complications, that he felt necessary for the novelist, especially with its emphasis on difference and variety, but this subject proved to be a complicated one for him too. It posed a threat to the "accumulation of history and custom," to the "manners and types" that he admired, as we see through his depiction of Sir Claude, a type who, with his archaic sense of manhood, represents some of these fading traditions that James deemed important to the novelist and to which he as an individual found himself drawn.

These are traditions that James felt were "absent" from American life, and in *What Maisie Knew* James reveals a fear that divorce, with its equalizing potential, would create a similar "absence" in Europe as well. In speaking of America, he says,

one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life [. . .]. No state, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentleman, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools -- no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class -- no Epsom nor Ascot!" (James, *Hawthorne* 43)

Though James's list encompasses variety, it demonstrates a particular yearning for high culture that contrasts with the democratic potential associated with divorce.<sup>27</sup> Kaplan

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<sup>27</sup> Several historians and critics, including Glenda Riley and Kimberly A. Freeman, have described divorce as peculiarly American, citing primarily its emphasis on democratic freedom. James, however, shows us in this novel the appeal for divorce in Europe as well.

asserts that James, in speaking of the “absent things” in American life, “articulates both a fear and a challenge underlying many realistic novels, that social ‘material’ as he calls it is not an absence but something monstrous and threatening, and that the novelist is not in the role of reflecting but of capturing, wrestling, and controlling a process of change which seems to defy representation” (10). In this novel, divorce is presented as “something monstrous and threatening” to the “manners, customs, usages, habits, forms” that James valued as a social being and as a novelist, for as Leon Edel notes, “they are the very stuff his work is made of” (Edel, *Henry James* 248).

As a representation of these traditional qualities that James suggests divorce threatened, Sir Claude struggles throughout the novel to come to terms with divorce, especially as it alters the way in which he identifies himself. He is presented as a man divided, and his struggle in some ways reflects James’s own. As a realist, James attempts to remain impartial on the highly politicized subject of divorce, but the novel has a satirical feel. It is a novel in which irony is heavy. Marcus Klein notes that “the novel shocks and confounds all the while that it jokes and invigorates” (135). Even James himself referred to it as an “ugly little comedy” (James, *Notebooks* 167). By highlighting the effects of divorce on both a small child and the gentlemanly figure, James, in a move that is uncharacteristic of his realist principles, casts divorce in a negative light and encourages our sympathies toward these characters. The various tensions that James feels on both a social and aesthetic level emerge most clearly in the seemingly marginal character Sir Claude, who embodies a fractured sense of masculinity that divorce, itself a fracture, illuminates.

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For James, like Howells, divorce functions as a thematically appropriate subject in that it enables circumvention of the marriage plot, which he found constraining. As Millicent Bell observes, James rejects plots that followed the predictable trajectory toward either marriage or death, favoring instead an open ending (*Meaning* 28).<sup>28</sup> The appeal of divorce and its potential to open the door to various possibilities is apparent. As he explains in “The Art of Fiction,” the novel should not be obligated to supply a happy ending, as was commonly expected. James, however, does more than simply disrupt our expectations by culminating the novel with a divorce, choosing instead to *begin* the novel with one. In doing so, he immediately focuses our attention on a conventional form – the marriage plot (and even the institution of marriage itself) -- that has been dismantled and thematically highlights societal shifts that he imagines divorce encouraged. In *Henry James and Masculinity: The Man at the Margins*, Kelly Cannon says, “James’s fiction frequently subverts traditional romance. Where the heterosexual plot fixates on courtship and marriage, James’s tales ‘distract’ the reader by focusing on ‘extracurricular’ activities that seem to lead nowhere” (91). With Sir Claude, James presents us with a portrait of a figure displaced by divorce, a figure in motion, but one seemingly going “nowhere.” He is a figure, as we shall see, whose identity (classed, gendered, and sexual) is presented as ungrounded.

Likewise, the subject of divorce leaves James a bit ungrounded in that it presents him with formal complications. James repeatedly, for example, insists on the mantra

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph Allen Boone makes this same observation in *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction*, asserting that James “spent his novelistic career plotting fictions that chipped away at the constraints imposed on theme and form by the marriage tradition” (186).



show, don't tell. As a realist, he felt that the novelist should maintain a certain aesthetic distance from his subject. In his prefaces, he identifies the artist as an "observer of manners and the painter of life" ("Preface," *What Maisie Knew* 30). To present the subject fairly and realistically, to not preach, the artist must remain impartial and objective. He must render life realistically and attempt to show what he sees, rather than tell what he thinks.

Divorce, though, as James recognized, can be telling, an exposé of sorts, in that it forces couples to formally outline their reasons for separation. Each party, in a court of law, must tell his or her side of a story, which then has the potential to become public record or public fodder. Riley, in *Divorce: An American Tradition*, describes how comprehensive studies were being conducted to better understand why "the divorce rate was steadily climbing" (119). One such study released in 1908 examined "marriage and divorce between 1887 and 1906," citing statistics that fueled the debate regarding the upswing (Riley 119). These statistics leave little room for interpretation, with a focus instead on the facts and numbers that have become public record and that demonstrate an expanding list of reasons for divorce. Public interest was such, however, that these facts soon became material for public consumption. Freeman notes that "Divorce was a popular subject in both the newspapers and bestselling literature of the late nineteenth century. Not only did newspapers serve as a means through which a litigant for divorce could notify an unsuspecting spouse but newspapers and magazines themselves featured detailed accounts of divorces, the more scandalous the better" (21). Divorce, as it moved into the twentieth century, became a subject of increasing interest, accounts of which people voraciously consumed.

Though perhaps a bit wary of its sensational appeal, James quickly realized its thematic and formal potential. In the prefaces, he repeatedly refers to his interest in a situation, or complication, around which the story develops. In his preface to *The Awkward Age*, he describes this as the “central object” (James, *Future* 62), and he presents the story from a central point of view – both experimental moves on his part. Given that divorce literally creates complications in the family structure as we see in this novel and that it is an issue around which sides are taken, its appeal as a subject for a novel is apparent; it is literally a complicating factor, one around which James could structure his novel, but in taking up this subject, James found that it created complications for him as a realist as well. In discussing James’s insistence on a central situation, Richard P. Blackmur notes how this “whole question is bound up with James’ exceeding conviction that the art of fiction is an organic form, and that it can neither be looked at all round nor will it be able to move on its own account unless it has a solidly posed centre” (xxiii). Moving divorce to the center becomes problematic, for divorce, as rupture, creates a shift in balance, a center with no solidity.

His investment in the idea of a central consciousness further illuminates this conflict. In his preface, James describes how Maisie functions as both the “centre and pretext for a fresh system of misbehavior” (“Preface,” *Maisie* 25). Divorce places her, the object divided, at the center, but by emphasizing division James stresses that this center is cracked. We see this also through his depiction of her bewildered state. Hers is the central consciousness through which all events in this novel are registered and filtered, but as James notes in his preface to this novel, “The infant mind would at the best leave great gaps and voids” (“Preface,” *Maisie* 27). These “gaps and voids” are what divorce, James

reveals, creates on so many different levels. On an aesthetic level, the subject matter exposes “gaps and voids” in James’s realist principles; on a social level, divorce, as James shows us, creates “gaps and voids” in long standing traditions and conventionalities. It leads to a shift in balance capable of marginalizing those previously holding positions of power, as we see with the character Sir Claude, a figure whose identity is left ungrounded, decentered, and displaced as a result.

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Sir Claude is a gentleman who is described as charming, well-mannered, and kind. Upon seeing his “‘cabinet’ photograph,” Maisie, we learn, “lost herself in admiration of the fair smooth face, the regular features, the kind eyes, the amiable air, the general glossiness and smartness of her prospective stepfather” (James, *Maisie* 64). His “kind” eyes and his “smooth” face with its “regular features” appeal to Maisie, whose life as a child divided between her feuding parents lacks any regularity and is instead best described as rocky, as she is tossed back and forth amid a sea of bitterness.<sup>29</sup> This image of Sir Claude and his association with formalities like cabinet photographs thus become attractive to the child. When she first meets him, she finds herself in awe of his “shining presence,” and we are told that “The joy almost overflowed in tears when he laid his hand on her and drew her to him, telling her, with a smile of which the promise was as bright as that of a Christmas-tree, that he knew her ever so well by her mother, but had come to see her now so that he might know her for himself” (James, *Maisie* 70). Enamored with this genteel man who takes an interest in her life, Maisie recognizes the “promise” of

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<sup>29</sup> In “Handing Over Power in *What Maisie Knew*, Jeff Westover offers a compelling analysis of the hand imagery in the novel, noting that Sir Claude has a softer touch that nurtures Maisie’s independence and autonomy.

possibilities in this figure who ironically lacks, according to society, the same sort of promise in his own life.

Sir Claude, like Howells's Ben Halleck, is presented as being akin to the Genteel Patriarch, "a devoted father who spent his time on his estate with his family" (Kimmel 13). This is an obsolete figure whom society, by the 1890s, had come to regard as effeminate, as a "sissy" in some cases. In 1902, Rafford Pyke described the sissy as "a slender youthful figure, smooth faced, a little vacuous in the expression of the countenance, with light hair and rather pale eyes a little wide apart; a voice not necessarily weak, but lacking timbre, resonance, carrying power" (qtd. in Kimmel 24). Sir Claude, with his smooth face and kind, inviting eyes, is young, a feature that is emphasized throughout the novel. As Miss Overmore tells Maisie, "He's ever so much younger --" (James, *Maisie* 59). He embodies the youthfulness that characterized the sissy, a youthfulness that unmoors him from a firm sense of manhood, which, as Kimmel notes, was defined in opposition to childhood (21).

Like the Genteel Patriarch of old, Sir Claude *attempts* to define his manhood in part by being a father. When Mrs. Beale says that she is surprised by Sir Claude's interest in Maisie, Sir Claude responds by saying, "The truth about me is simply that I'm the most unappreciated of – what do you call the fellows? – 'family-men.' Yes, I'm a family-man; upon my honour I am!" (James, *Maisie* 72). He goes on to bemoan the loss of such women, exclaiming, "there *are* no family-women – hanged if there are! None of them want any children – hanged if they do!" (James, *Maisie* 73). While Sir Claude's insistence that he speaks upon his "honour" might initially lead us to question his sincerity, it is not sincerity that he lacks. The repetition instead speaks to his struggle to

define and assert his manhood, which he associates with the relatively anachronistic term “honour,” in a society where gender roles were in flux. Even James, in his notebooks, imagines Sir Claude as a “simple, good, mild chap, bullied, hustled by his wife, and not destined, as he is already sure, or at any rate definitely apprehensive, to have a child of his own: the thing he has almost predominantly married for” (James, *Notebooks* 149). James identifies Sir Claude as “simple” and “good,” a stark contrast to the nastiness of Ida and Beale. He is further imagined as being “bullied” and “hustled” by the woman he marries, as being the weaker of the two, a position that is reinforced by his unfulfilled desire for a child. James’s focus here is on loss – this “simple, good, mild chap” is struggling to find his way in a world characterized by domineering women, immoralities, and a selfish desire for wealth and status.

As the only male in the novel to take an interest in Maisie, Sir Claude is singled out as possessing a different type of manhood from the others. He exhibits behavior, which, as Bederman notes, “had once appeared self-possessed and manly but now seemed overcivilized and effeminate” (17). As economic shifts took men away from the home and thrust them into the workforce, women became the primary caretakers of children (Kimmel 21), but in this novel we see Sir Claude taking charge of Maisie when her mother won’t. He makes an attempt, for example, to attend to Maisie’s faltering and nearly non-existent education by sending her books in his absence, and later we learn that Maisie’s “dream of lectures at an institution had at least become a reality, thanks to Sir Claude’s now unbounded energy in discovering what could be done” (James, *Maisie* 138). What we have is a reversal of roles that further skews Sir Claude’s identity as a man in his present day, but it is a reversal that James suggests is encouraged by divorce,

hence his conflicted outlook toward the subject. Sir Claude, who is “always declaring that it was death to him not to lead a domestic life” (James, *Maisie* 94), makes it known that he is disgusted with Ida’s behavior and her neglect of the child, thereby aligning himself with that older version of manhood that defined itself in part by family.

Throughout the novel, he repeatedly refers to Maisie’s parents’ “defection, their extraordinary baseness, that has made our responsibility” (James, *Maisie* 251). In taking Maisie under his wing, he is attempting to take on a “responsibility” that her birth parents, with their selfish desires, have shirked. With this comment, he, like James, distances himself from what he regards as base behavior, suggesting that such behavior is not normal, but a “defection.” This view aligns him with the Victorian code of the earlier part of the nineteenth century, a code that placed family as the bedrock of society and a code that deemed it abnormal and unfeminine for a woman to abandon her child as the masculine Ida, who aptly “showed a superiority” at the game of billiards, does (James, *Maisie* 38). As May explains, “It was the wife’s duty to maintain a home environment free from sensuality, to help protect husbands and sons from dissipation” (17-18). Ida, of course, shirks this duty; she fails to provide a home for Maisie, and she succumbs to her own sensuality, leaving both her first husband and eventually Sir Claude.

James thus positions Sir Claude as morally superior to the other adult parties here, but also as weak, as feminized, as ineffective – and like Ben Halleck he even regards himself as such. Upon taking an interest in Maisie, he says, “I’m not an angel – I’m an old grandmother” [. . .] ‘I like babies – I always did. If we go to smash I shall look for a place as responsible nurse’” (James, *Maisie* 74). In this passage, he aligns himself with both the past and the feminine – in essence, with that older version of manhood that was

considered effeminate in his present day. He refers to himself as an “old” lady, as a “grandmother” who has cared for more than one generation of children. Moreover, he describes himself as a “responsible nurse,” a profession at this time typically held by women and one characterized by an ability to nurture and heal. He demonstrates possession of this ability as he attempts to comfort Maisie, who finds herself bewildered by all of the shifts taking place in her life. At one point, we learn how as “he drew her closer she buried her head on his shoulder and cried without sound and without pain” (James, *Maisie* 102). In caring for her here as a mother would, he shows a soft side characteristic of what Bederman calls “Victorian manliness” (17). In *Manliness and Civilization*, she discusses how this type of manliness came to be viewed as “weak and effeminate” as a “rough working class masculinity [became] powerfully attractive” (17). Sir Claude, in adopting this nurturing role, thus fails to live up to what society considered the norm. He is what Foss calls one of James’s “sympathetic male figure[s] who sides with the heroine’s freedom and against controlling antagonists” (n. pag.). This sympathy that he exhibits for Maisie thus further reinforces his marginal status in a society that relegated such behavior to the feminine sphere or domestic realm.<sup>30</sup>

James, in his presentation of this character, makes it clear that Sir Claude is a man of leisure who lacks a certain hardness that had come to characterize masculinity in the years leading up to the turn of the century. We learn, for example, that Ida

was finally forced to make no secret of her husband’s unfitness for real responsibilities. The day came indeed when her breathless auditors learnt from her in bewilderment that what ailed him was that he was, alas,

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<sup>30</sup> In *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, editors Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler offer an overview of how “the culture of sentiment became less directly identified with public virtue and benevolence and more associated with women’s moral, nurturing role in the private sphere of the bourgeois family” (3).

simply not serious. Maisie wept on Mrs Wix's bosom after hearing that Sir Claude was a butterfly; considering moreover, that her governess but half-patched it up in coming out at various moments the next few days with the opinion that it was proper to his 'station' to be careless and free. (James, *Maisie* 89)

Ida's confession is made of course for the purpose of advancing her own interests.

Nevertheless, it reveals that Sir Claude does not stand on firm financial ground and that he lacks a steady job. He is presented instead as a man of leisure, a "station" to which Mrs. Wix relegates him in an effort to "patch" up the reality of what they have learned. Society's view of such men is evident in this passage as Mrs. Wix attempts to rationalize why he acts as "careless and free" as a butterfly, a fragile creature that flitters about here and there. Mrs. Wix's reaction to this news is melodramatic; it shatters her ideal of him by construing him as weak and unmanly, and this ideal is one that Mrs. Wix quickly tries to recover. We see this again when she says, "'He's a wonderful nature, but he can't live like the lilies. He's all right, you know, but he must have a high interest.' She had more than once remarked that his affairs were sadly involved, but that they must get him – Maisie and she together apparently – into Parliament" (James, *Maisie* 95). Here, we have a biblical allusion to Matthew 6:28, which reads, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin." They simply exist; Mrs. Wix implies that Sir Claude cannot, that he needs firmness and stability, a solid foundation on which to base his identity as a man in present day England. In recognizing this, Mrs. Wix comes up with the idea that they "must get him" a place in Parliament to cement his position in society and to regain the gentleman's lost sense of honor and respect. However, the fact that Mrs. Wix makes it her responsibility to secure a station in life for him further positions him as weak and shows how others wield a power over him that he no longer possesses, if he ever did. Hence, Mrs. Wix concludes, he is "a poor sunk slave [. . .] to his



passions” (James, *Maisie* 233). She suggests that he is ruled by his heart, rather than his head, and by concluding that he is a slave she strips him of any autonomy that he might have had. We get a picture of him as an irresolute and wayward man, as one too weak to walk a firm and straight path.

With him, we see what Thorstein Veblen calls “The subsequent relative decline in the use of conspicuous leisure as a basis of repute” (57). What had once been an admirable marker of reputation for the gentry came to be regarded as feminine. Writing in 1899, Veblen explains how “economic circumstances” fostered the creation of “the ordinary business man”; the wife, in order to maintain “reputability,” becomes “the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces” (50, 51, and 52). Hence, Ida complains that Sir Claude, who is glaringly unproductive, is a disappointment, and Sir Claude’s reputation suffers for his failure to live up to the new masculine ideal set forth by society.

This is an ideal that James critiques and one that shapes his sympathetic portrayal of Sir Claude. In speaking of changes to culture that were taking place at this time, James says,

The condition of that body [the English upper class] seems to me to be in many ways much the same rotten and *collapsible* one as that of the French aristocracy before the revolution – [. . .] or perhaps it’s more like the heavy, congested and depraved Roman world upon which the barbarians came down. [. . .] At all events, much of English life is grossly materialistic and wants blood-letting” (James qtd. in Berland 140)

In this passage, he reveals a sense of disdain and disgust at the collapse of the upper class. He regards the gross display and desire for wealth that Ida and Beale exhibit in the

novel as vulgar, and he positions Sir Claude as residing among the fragmented ruins left in their wake.

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James's fondness for customs and conventions, for traditional forms, which is apparent in his articulation of the "absent things" in American life, associates him with the past and with this particular type of elite manhood that he imagines divorce threatened. James was from old New York stock. Millicent Bell describes how "Boundaries social as well as geographic defined this polite nineteenth-century Manhattan, in which everyone was connected with everyone else by family recognitions and habits of association inherited for several generations" (*Edith Wharton and Henry James*, 46). His association with "polite" society and with 'old' New York positions him as belonging to an elite group, to a past that had largely vanished by the late nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Millicent Bell notes that James (and Edith Wharton) "were at once critical and nostalgic about this world they left far behind. It was small and provincial; it could never have contained either of them; nevertheless it was better than what came after" (*Edith Wharton and Henry James* 47). This "critical and nostalgic" attitude is felt throughout the text as James examines the loss that ensues alongside and as a result of divorce, a feature of modernity that appealed to him aesthetically on both a formal and thematic level and one that scared and appalled him on a social one. Bell's comment that the polite society of old "was better than what came after" speaks to the conflict residing at the center of this novel and nods at the class and gender issues that James examines in relation to the

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<sup>31</sup> In *Henry James and Masculinity*, Kelly Cannon discusses that "To belong to this elite sector meant to bear witness to some tenable claim to high culture that uniformly critiqued what was crude, ugly, and basely material in America" (130). She goes on to discuss his preference for the "Old World" of Europe (130-131).

subject of divorce through his depiction of the marginal character Sir Claude, who harbors old fashioned qualities and values that lead other characters in the novel to position him as a charming ideal from a different era.

This is an ideal that James suggests cannot withstand the strength of modern forces such as divorce, yet this marginal figure takes center stage in Maisie's life. Cannon comments on James's increasing interest in marginality: "Conscious or unconscious, the later focus on marginality implies a creative impulse in James to unite art with his personal life" (3). In this novel, however, we see James resisting this impulse in an attempt to remain true to his aesthetic by adopting and maintaining an objective and detached perspective, by presenting life as accurately as he could, not as he imagined it to be. Cannon goes on to assert that "The frequent occurrence of this marginal type suggests James' consciousness of alternative masculinity and an awareness that he was creating a world substantively different from the typically masculine world one reads about in conventional fiction or experiences in the workaday world" (1-2). While the re-occurrence of this figure does suggest an awareness of a different type of masculinity, it is a type that calls to mind a manhood rooted in the past, and this glance backwards to an older ideal creates a tension in the text heightened by James's focus as a realist on the present moment and on his commitment to presenting life in an objective, rather than idealistic, manner. In an effort to stymie this tension and to uphold his aesthetic principles, he presents Sir Claude as flawed. This figure therefore plays a crucial role in the text and helps us better understand the dilemmas that the subject of divorce posed for James as an author and as an individual.

Over the years, many critics have approached James's interest in marginality by drawing a connection between his own sexuality and that of his characters. Millicent Bell, for example, describes James himself as "the most distinguished and profound of those elegant and ironic observers, both members and exiles from the 'polite' world" (*Edith Wharton and Henry James* 35). Cannon, meanwhile, asserts that "James shares with several of his fictional creations the peculiar agonies and satisfactions of marginality" (5). Hugh Stevens is another who, in *Henry James and Sexuality*, takes stock of James's interest in the marginal, asserting that James "paradoxically constituted himself as 'queer'" (ix). He goes on in this text to examine what he calls James's "poor sensitive gentleman," though he does not offer a discussion of *What Maisie Knew* (145). Meanwhile, biographer Edel states that James's brother William considered Henry "too much of a sissy to play with boys like himself who curse and swear" (*Henry James* 245). Edel also describes James as having a fear of women that he classifies in the biography as "a symptom of his own troubled sexuality" (*Henry James* 87). That James's character Sir Claude possesses such a fear of women is telling, for it speaks to this figure's "troubled" sense of identity. To view this effeminate figure as merely a representation of James's own ambiguous sexuality, however, is limiting.

It behooves us instead to examine this troubled figure in relation to divorce and its effect on various constructs of manhood. In "Failed Heterosexuality in *The Portrait of a Lady*," Robert K. Martin says, "James's novel juxtaposes a social world in which heterosexuality is the norm with a set of characters who have failed to live up to that norm, and the failed relationships are situated in a world increasingly questioning gender and sexuality" (87). In *What Maisie Knew*, we see Sir Claude struggling to define (and

assert) his manhood when the grounds on which he attempts to base his identity (marriage and fatherhood) fail. Stevens asserts that “it is worth pointing out what [James’s] fiction conspicuously doesn’t do – namely, it does not tell the story of the maturing male who makes himself through marriage and the establishment of a family” (x). His fiction does, though, tell the story of a man who *tries* to ‘make’ himself in this way; it becomes important then to look at why he fails. In *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity*, Leland S. Person suggests that “James seems bent on decentering the phallus as the privileged signifier of masculinity and opening male identity and male subjectivity to alternative performances of manhood” (66). While Sir Claude certainly functions as a figure decentered, James in this novel imagines divorce as a contributing factor, and by depicting divorce as a destructive force he shifts our attention to loss. It is not then necessarily an alternative type of manhood that James envisions, but a traditional one that he sought to reclaim and uphold, despite his presentation of it as weak and ineffective. His critique of this character is thus undercut by a certain level of sympathy. In his introduction to the novel, Paul Theroux acknowledges, “Sir Claude is a most ambiguous character, and it is one of the triumphs of the novel that James puts us in Maisie’s position and makes us overlook – almost – Sir Claude’s weaknesses” (16). That we don’t overlook his flaws and weaknesses is important because it helps us understand James’s conflicted attitude toward both this figure and the subject of divorce.

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Sir Claude is representative of a type that we see throughout James’s novels. He is what Millicent Bell calls one of James’s “dilettante-observer” types (*Edith Wharton and Henry James* 255). She describes how, time after time, “such male characters in his

fiction are coupled with an eager and loving feminine spirit which they subtly or harshly disappoint by an inner coldness” (*Edith Wharton and Henry James* 36).<sup>32</sup> While Sir Claude does not harbor “an inner coldness,” he does critique himself, especially for actions that he considers weak, or feminine. Likewise, James’s sympathy for this character is tempered with a subtle critique stemming in part from his attempts as a realist to present this character, with whom he relates on a social level, objectively, to render him in full complexity, with special attention to his flaws, to prevent him from becoming a type commonly seen in the modes of fiction that James, as a realist, disparaged.

Despite not having a legal obligation to care for Maisie, Sir Claude willingly commits himself to her, a move that James applauds. When Maisie questions whether she will continue to see Sir Claude despite the ever shifting relations between her parents and step-parents, Sir Claude says “gravely and kindly. ‘Don’t be afraid, Maisie; you won’t lose sight of me’” (James, *Maisie* 114). The fact that he speaks “gravely” alludes to the seriousness of the situation, while the fact that he speaks “kindly” suggests that others have not been so kind in Maisie’s life. Here, he vows to remain a constant for her; in doing so, he becomes a central figure in her young life. He emerges from the ‘gaps and voids’ in society to fill the void in Maisie’s life caused by the divorce of her parents, an admirable move but not a wholly selfless one.

James, we know, originally conceived of the notion that Sir Claude and Maisie would be drawn to each other in their loneliness (James, *Notebooks* 149), and that they

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<sup>32</sup> In *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity*, Leland S. Person discusses James’s reconstruction of “two male character types [. . .] – what social historians have called the Masculine Achiever and the Christian Gentleman” in *The Ambassadors* and in *The Portrait of a Lady* (66). He goes on to argue that James’s attempts at reconstruction result in “reinscribing a phallogentric masculinity – a sublimated or ‘sheathed’ masculinity, camouflaged in a feminine position, but a masculinity still as ‘keen’ as a ‘quick-flashing blade’” (100).

are.<sup>33</sup> When Maisie exclaims that Sir Claude “can’t understand her troubles,” he replies, “‘I *can* understand it,’ he confessed. ‘I *am* in the same state’” (James, *Maisie* 106). His confession alludes to a confidence that has developed between the two and reduces him to the level of a child (the opposite of manhood). Further, this budding relationship speaks to his desire for a sense of unity, or structure, in his fractured life.

This sense of unity is one that James, who viewed the novel as an organic whole and who gave this novel a highly rigid structure, admires. Thematically, divorce suggests separation, but unity is a key feature of James’s aesthetic. For him, form and subject matter are inextricably linked. As he explains in “The Art of Fiction,” “The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread” (James, *Future* 21). According to James, the two depend on each other; a union is vital to the organic whole.<sup>34</sup> He views the novel as “a living thing, all one and continuous,” an assemblage in which “in each of the parts there is something of the other parts” (James, *Future* 15). Aesthetically he strives for unity, which divorce inherently threatens, and this tension contributes to the ambivalence felt throughout.

Hence, he creates a novel with a rigid and balanced formal structure to serve as a ballast against thematic disorder, rupture, and division. The formal structure of this novel

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<sup>33</sup> Marcus Klein asserts that the “idea of loss itself got lost” and that Sir Claude is drawn to Maisie simply “because he is afraid of her mother, and then, soon hereafter, because he is also afraid of her new stepmother, while Maisie herself presents not exactly no sexual challenge but one of a kind so sufficiently ambiguous as to be deniable” (143). Sir Claude, however, is presented throughout as possessing (and repressing) sexual desire for the child, and while fear is certainly one element that does indeed draw him to the child, loss plays a role too and should not be so quickly dismissed. Allen F. Stein in *After the Vows Were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism*, offers a different reading, observing that “what predominates here for all the adultery, dishonesty, and pain associated with marriage is [. . .] not an attack on the institution but a poignant sense of what is lost when marriages fail or when matrimony itself is not respected sufficiently” (127).

<sup>34</sup> Leon Edel notes that “With Henry James, form and matter were inseparable” (Edel, “Introduction” xiv).

highlights the lack of structure in the lives of the characters who couple and uncouple throughout the text.<sup>35</sup> It also suggests an attempt on James's part to impose a sense of order and control over what he recognized as a potentially destructive social force (Kaplan 10). In his notebooks, he envisions "this intensely structural, intensely hinged and jointed preliminary frame" (James, *Notebooks* 162). This emphasis on a frame calls to mind a solid foundation and directs our attention to the lack of such a foundation in the lives of his characters and to the lack of solidity highlighted by moving divorce (rupture) to the center. Seeing how carefully he outlined his plans for the novel in his notebooks reveals a display of fastidious and orderly thought that sharply differs from the constant movement of the divorcées depicted in the text who regard this movement as a type of freedom.

The promise of social freedom is one that made James uncomfortable, as we see with the fearful and uncertain Sir Claude, who clings to Maisie as divorce threatens to upset his own life, including his identity as a man. While in the park with Maisie, he "delightfully" imagines that they are in the "Forest of Arden" and that he is the "banished duke" (James, *Maisie* 122). He romanticizes himself as victim here and identifies himself as a marginalized figure, as one who previously held an authoritative position of power. As such, he holds fast to Maisie, who has also been thrust aside. When he runs into Ida and her new lover in the park and when Ida questions what he is doing with *her* daughter, he simply says, "'She's mine.' [ . . . ] 'Mine. You've given her up'" (James, *Maisie* 125). The short declarative statements affirm Sir Claude's insistence that Maisie is now his

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<sup>35</sup> In his introduction to the novel, Theroux observes, "It is a novel of threes: three characters battling at any one time (and Maisie is always one of them), three parks [ . . . ], three settings [ . . . ]. Ida will have had three husbands and Beale three wives; and Maisie comes under the protection of three men [ . . . ] and three women [ . . . ]" (12-13).



charge, but by declaring possession of her Sir Claude demonstrates an effort on his part to take control of what Ida holds power over and to reclaim a lost sense of authority, a move that speaks to Sir Claude's struggle to maintain a firm sense of identity in the face of shifts caused by divorce. Thus, he makes Maisie "his little accepted charge his duty and his life" (James, *Maisie* 103). While in the company of Mrs. Wix, he says to Maisie, "I give you my word before her, and I give it to her before you, that I'll never, never, forsake you. Do you hear that, old fellow, and do you take it in? I'll stick to you through everything" (James, *Maisie* 101). This passage recalls that of a wedding ceremony. His emphasis is on trust, on his "word," and to affirm his dedication he repeats that he will "never" leave her. He can sympathize with Maisie, for he knows from experience what it feels like to be forsaken. He speaks to her with an air of familiarity by calling her "old fellow" and proclaims that he will "stick" to her "through everything." The sexual imagery surrounding this pairing is suggestive. As Klein notes, "Sir Claude issues an erotic charge wherever he goes, and, particularly, there is sexual implication in almost all of his passages with Maisie" (144). By presenting him in this way, James alludes to Sir Claude's sensual desires, to what Hadley calls "the dirty water of adult passions" (217), which James suggests divorce encouraged. James thus presents Sir Claude as lacking not only a firm sense of identity but a firm sense of morality as well. For James, the two are related, and the disunion between them both reflects and helps us understand James's conflicted attitude toward this figure and more largely toward the subject of divorce.

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James himself decided not to marry, choosing instead the more unconventional path of a bachelor's life. According to biographer Edel, James felt that marriage "might

prove a threat to his art and his personal sovereignty” (*Henry James* 229). In this novel, however, he also presents divorce as a “threat” to the very same. Upon learning of his brother’s engagement, he wrote, “ ‘I had long wished to see you married; I believe almost as much in matrimony for other people as I believe in it little for myself – which is saying a good deal’ ” (qtd. in Edel, *Henry James* 244). From these comments, it is clear that James respected the institution of marriage – it is one of those “customs” to which he refers in his review of Hawthorne -- but for various reasons on which critics have speculated over the years, he decided that marriage was not for him.

Despite his belief in the institution of marriage, he was not utterly opposed to the idea of divorce. He supported his good friend Edith Wharton’s decision to leave her husband in 1913, for example. In a letter to her, he writes, “you must insist on saving your life by a separate existence. You must *trancher* at all costs” (Powers 182). That the situation between the two had become dire in James’s eyes is evident. His focus here is on a figurative type of survival. He encourages physical and emotional separation, insisting by his use of the word “trancher” that she literally sever ties with her husband in an effort to save what he suggests the marriage consumed – her life. In doing so, he recognizes that divorce in this particular instance is necessary in order to preserve what he feared the marriage threatened – personal identity. As Melissa Ganz, in a discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady*, notes, “the younger James [. . .] remains invested in the sanctity, permanence, and privacy of marriage,” though he is “keenly aware of the psychological costs of remaining in a miserable union” and “also deeply concerned about the moral and

social implications of liberal divorce laws” (169). In *What Maisie Knew*, James reveals a complicated attitude toward the subject as he explores these “costs” and “implications.”<sup>36</sup>

Even though he is wary of the social freedoms that divorce afforded, he recognized (as is evident in his comments to Wharton and his comments about marriage in general) that marriage sometimes compromised social freedoms or led to loss of the self on some levels as well. In his preface to the novel, he describes “the father having, in the freedom of divorce, but to take another wife, as well as the mother, under a like license, another husband” (James, “Preface,” *Maisie* 25). On an artistic level he recognizes the endless possibilities, or the “freedom” to create, in this set up. On a social level, he remains aware of the “ugly facts” (James, “Preface,” *Maisie* 23), the “infected air,” and the “immoral world” which his characters inhabit (James, “Preface,” *Maisie* 24). He takes an interest in Maisie’s “bringing people together who would be at least more correctly separate; keeping people separate who would be at least more correctly together; flourishing, to a degree, at the cost of many conventions and proprieties, even decencies, really keeping the torch of virtue alive in an air tending infinitely to smother it” (James, “Preface,” *Maisie* 25-26). Here, he expresses both delight – in Maisie’s ability to ‘flourish’ as a result of the new arrangement – and disappointment – at the loss of “conventions and proprieties” that accompanies it, “conventions and proprieties” that James associates with “virtue.”

This conflicted attitude is seen years later too in response to his friend Edith Wharton’s troubled marital situation. He identified her way of life as “A nightmare of

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<sup>36</sup> At this point in his life, James found himself torn between commitment to society and commitment to self, and it is this conflict that we see him grappling with throughout the novel. The younger James, we know, initially adhered to his father’s belief that “marriage was a ‘strictly social institution’” (Ganz 161). In this novel, we see his views shifting; he, like Sir Claude, is in some ways in a state of flux.

perpetually renewable choice and decision” -- a “nightmare,” as Millicent Bell describes, because of the “the delusion that choices were ‘perpetually renewable,’ when the moralist in him declared that they were not” (*Edith Wharton and Henry James* 116). Yet “choice and decision” is what he thrived on as an artist. As Sheldon M. Novick says in the introduction to *Henry James and Homo-Erotic Desire*, James “was a Victorian gentleman of conservative views. As a young man he agonized and renounced and, as Nicolas Buchele remarks, he portrayed in his fiction with irritating regularity versions of his moral agonies and renunciations” (11-12). In this novel, these “moral agonies” are projected onto the character Sir Claude.

Morality is a question that rested at the center of the divorce debates and is a concept central to James’s realist principles.<sup>37</sup> In “The Art of Fiction,” James says, “the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel – the merit on which all other merits (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submissively depend” (James, *Future* 14). With an emphasis on “solidity,” his focus again turns to unity – two concepts that he presents divorce threatens. As James explains in his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, the artist has a responsibility to not “break with his values,” to not “be disconnected” (James, *Future* 70). Divorce, however, highlights disconnections, and as many historians and sociologists have pointed out contributed to a disconnect, or shift, in societal values that moral conservative Francis Peabody identified as “social wreckage” (O’Neill 48). His focus, along with others who viewed divorce as immoral, is on its capability of destroying what

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<sup>37</sup> William O’Neill discusses the morality question at length in *Divorce in the Progressive Era*. Nelson Manfred Blake is another who offers a focused discussion of the subject in his book *The Road to Reno: A History of Divorce in the United States*.

had come before, thereby creating a disunion of sorts that James was not comfortable with on an aesthetic or social level. According to O'Neill, "What made a moral conservative was not a particular political or religious philosophy, but a belief in the unity of the human community" (74). This emphasis on unity resides at the core of James's realist principles, and the ambivalent air in the novel reflects the discordant values shaped by this subject that we see expressed by Sir Claude.

Despite his apparent goodness and sincere concern for Maisie, Sir Claude engages in behavior that does not square with his projected moral code, and this is a quality of his that James critiques and one that leads him to further position this character as ineffective. James first and foremost focuses our attention on the fact that Sir Claude engages in an affair with another (married) woman. As Sir Claude tells Maisie, "your mother lets me do what I want so long as I let her do what *she* wants" (James, *Maisie* 105). Here, James shows us a crack in Sir Claude's character, a disunion of sorts between his actions and the image he attempts to portray.

Nevertheless, James is not able to completely dismiss his sympathy for this figure, clearly identifying Maisie's mother as the one with the upper hand. She is the one who makes the decision to 'let' Sir Claude do what he wants. It is only by default that he does the same, or so he claims. In this way, James makes us aware of a weakness on the part of Sir Claude that he simultaneously sympathizes with and critiques much in the same way that he does with the subject of divorce. This occurs again, for example, when Sir Claude says that he would not care if Maisie's father caused a row about his illicit relationship with Mrs. Beale, claiming, "Oh I shouldn't mind a 'complaint'" (James, *Maisie* 105). Such a "complaint" would jeopardize his reputation, but Sir Claude indicates that it is not

a concern of his. He tries to brush it off. James presents Sir Claude's proclamation that he does not care as a flaw in his character to better paint a portrait of a man conflicted, of a man lacking a firm sense of identity in a society marked by ever present shifts.<sup>38</sup> We see him grappling to maintain his manhood – and moral sense -- when he wavers in front of Maisie. In an attempt to present himself as an upstanding gentleman, he initially lies about seeing Mrs. Beale, telling Maisie “we must walk very straight” (James, *Maisie* 84). This statement shows an awareness on his part that he is not taking the conventional, morally acceptable, path, and it is this awareness that suggests his conflict.

Sir Claude thus has moments of self-critique that better help to bring this question of morality to the forefront. When Mrs. Wix, for example, suggests that she and Sir Claude run off together with the child, Sir Claude says to Maisie, ““I beg your pardon [. . .] for appearing to discuss that sort of possibility under your sharp little nose. But the fact is I *forget* half the time that Ida's your sainted mother”” (James, *Maisie* 99). Here, James directly references the ‘possibilities’ that Sir Claude represents for Maisie – possibilities that allude to artistic freedom on a figurative level and social freedom on a literal one. As James acknowledges in his preface to this novel, he recognizes in the various marriages and remarriages opportunities for himself as an artist to create. In his preface to this novel, he also acknowledges that these arrangements show us how “the chance of happiness and [. . .] an improved state might be here involved for the child” (James, “Preface,” *Maisie* 24). In other words, they present her with possibilities beyond what the

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<sup>38</sup> Millicent Bell comments on James's view of what he called the “mania of publicity,” noting that “He had a particular horror of the menace of democratic curiosity about the personal lives of the wealthy or the famous which was fanned to consuming by the popular press” (*Edith Wharton and Henry James* 76).

court ordered and therefore allude to a literal freedom from the constraints imposed on her by the divorce of her parents.

Meanwhile, as Mrs. Wix recognizes, a divorce from Ida would give Sir Claude the physical freedom to start anew with her. When this subject comes up, Sir Claude goes on to critique himself for discussing what society might deem inappropriate in front of the child. He apologizes with an air of formality and a sense of politeness markedly absent from the modern world that Maisie's parents inhabit, and he makes his disdain for Ida, whom he sarcastically alludes to as "sainted," clear. In this way, he distances himself from her behavior and functions as the 'good chap' James initially imagined him to be in his notebooks.

As such, Sir Claude continues to question whether it is morally right to take such liberties with Maisie and treat her with an air of familiarity that Mrs. Wix suggests is not appropriate in a parent-child relationship. When Mrs. Wix protests that Maisie should not "see" the letter to Mrs. Beale regarding her separation from Maisie's father, Sir Claude "turn[s] red – he even looked a little foolish. 'You think it's too bad, eh? But it's precisely because it's bad that it seemed to me it would have a lesson and a virtue for her'" (James, *Maisie* 196). That Sir Claude colors a bit reveals a sincere desire on his part to care for Maisie and to act in a way that others consider appropriate. At the same time, the fact that he blushes positions him as weak, as lacking the solidity, self-confidence, and authority that defined manhood in previous years. His response reveals a man conflicted.

This conflict is heightened as he maintains a familiar intimacy with the child throughout, calling her “old man” (James, *Maisie* 87), “dear boy,” (James, *Maisie* 243), “old chap” (James, *Maisie* 246), and other such endearments. The homo-erotic undercurrents show a character unsure of himself. Klein observes that “The character who was to have wanted to have a child of his own is discernible in Sir Claude as he comes to be, but this wish is ultimately mixed with or undermined by his other confused and complicating kinds of desire” (143). This state of confusion manifests itself in his faltering sense of identity. In speaking with Maisie, Sir Claude vacillates. Even the narrator confirms that “He was liable in talking with her to take the tone of her being also a man of the world” (James, *Maisie* 84). Here, we see that Sir Claude regards himself as a cosmopolitan man, a type no longer considered manly or masculine in his present day, and his regard for Maisie – a young girl – as his equal, as “also” such a man, further situates him as an outcast in the modern world by revealing an affinity with both childhood and femininity. This in turn reminds us that, despite the apparent freedom granted by divorce, he still lacks a certain sense of liberty, or authority, rather, that he so desires – a constantly voiced concern throughout – and perhaps it is because of this that he is able to impart some sense of freedom to Maisie, recognizing that freedom is something that she lacks as well, given the position that her parents’ divorce has put her in.

While Sir Claude might not attain the authority that he so desires, he does encourage Maisie’s, a move that James esteems. As Westover says, “it is Sir Claude’s kindness and care that nurture Maisie’s autonomy” (10). Worth noting is that Sir Claude is perhaps the only character who encourages this independence in Maisie; to her own



parents she is a mere pawn and to Mrs. Wix the moralist she should remain sheltered. Sir Claude's approach is different. Early in the novel, for example, he makes her choose between staying with her father (and Mrs. Beale) or going home to Mrs. Wix and her mother. As Sir Claude says, "I leave the thing, now that we're here, absolutely *with* you. You must settle it. We'll only go if in if you say so. If you don't say so we'll turn right round and drive away" (James, *Maisie* 110). Sir Claude puts the decision on Maisie, failing to assert his own authority but encouraging hers. Later, when the situation between him, Mrs. Beale, and Mrs. Wix reaches the height of complications, Sir Claude describes how he told himself, "Go straight over and put it to her: let her choose, freely, her own self." He goes on to tell Maisie, "So I do, old girl – I put it to you. *Can* you choose freely?" (James, *Maisie* 248). He shows us here his own weakness, for he had to convince himself that this is the best course of action to take, but in showing us his weakness he shows us an attempt to rid Maisie of hers. By referring to her as "old girl," he indicates that he regards her as more than just a child, and by reiterating that she should "choose, freely, her own self," he reveals an awareness that he is cultivating her individuality, her personhood, her "own self," just as he reveals an awareness that she should choose "her own self" above all others, that she should focus on her own growth and what's best for her. Even in making the decision to grant her a sense of freedom he asks if she can accept it, again putting the power and decision in her hands. By the novel's end, it is Maisie who makes the decision to leave Sir Claude, and it is Maisie who initiates the good-byes. Sir Claude's cultivation of her own self leads Maisie in the end to choose her own freedom, to free herself from the situation that her parents and the divorce put her in.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In *After the Vows Were Spoken: Marriage in American Literary Realism*, Allen F. Stein, like Jeff

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Meanwhile, Sir Claude's own sense of independence suffers. Divorce imposes limits that James as an artist figuratively wanted to do away with just as it breaches limits that he socially wanted to uphold, fostering new ones in the process that threatened to overturn the old. Through his depiction of Sir Claude we see how the latter's own social freedoms, his freedoms as a man, are limited and threatened by his divorce with Ida. We learn, for example that Ida leaves Sir Claude when "The limit of a passion for Sir Claude had certainly been reached" (James, *Maisie* 91). This "limit" creates an additional one for Sir Claude in that it deconstructs his family – the foundation on which he attempts to base his identity as a man. It grants him an apparent social freedom that leaves him in a state of bewilderment, and in the end this marginal figure, like Howells's Ben Halleck, suffers most from divorce. Once it sinks in, "at last Sir Claude produced it. 'I'm free – I'm free,'" a phrase that Maisie repeats twice as well (James, *Maisie* 180). The repetition indicates that Sir Claude is in a state of disbelief and also that he is a bit uncomfortable with his newfound freedom. Whereby the domineering Ida rendered him impotent in the marriage, divorce creates a shift in family dynamics that further renders that old version of manhood nearly obsolete.

To demonstrate this, James presents this character as powerless in the face of divorce. The power is in Ida's hands, not Sir Claude's – and this is something that even Maisie recognizes. When Mrs. Beale says that Sir Claude is "Free, first, to divorce his

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Westover, discusses Maisie's growth. While he acknowledges Sir Claude's encouragement, he ultimately positions the marriage (and divorce) between her parents as the "educative" force behind her decision, leading him to conclude that "What this all amounts to, of course, is no striking affirmation of marriage on James's part but an awareness that one does not find in the shorter fiction that the pain associated with any given marriage *can* be educative, if not for the married persons themselves at least for one tied intimately to marriage" (125).

own fiend” and then reiterates that “he’ll get his divorce,” we learn that “Maisie was briefly silent; after which, ‘No – he won’t get it’” (James, *Maisie* 229). Maisie knows that Sir Claude will not pursue the break just as she knows that her mother will not willingly give him up. By depicting him in this way, James imagines that divorce and the shifting power dynamics that go along with it only further weakened this figure and cemented his place in the margins of society, suggesting that the social freedoms granted by divorce are illusory and dangerous. As Maisie says, “What had really happened was that Sir Claude was ‘free’ and that Mrs Beale was ‘free’, and yet that the new medium was somehow still more oppressive than the old” (James, *Maisie* 251-252). Maisie realizes that the apparent freedom only creates additional complications. This freedom, as James shows, leads Ida and Beale to give up Maisie, and it leaves Sir Claude ungrounded and weak.

Like Howells’s Ben Halleck, he finds himself immobilized by fear. When asked why he, Mrs. Wix, and Maisie “can’t make a little family,” Sir Claude responds, “‘It’s very base of me, no doubt, but I can’t wholly chuck your mother’” (James, *Maisie* 110). Sir Claude replies with a bit of sarcasm by referring to his declination of the proposal as “base.” He says he “can’t” leave Ida, indicating that he is physically not able to do so. Later, when the Captain says that Sir Claude will “have left” Ida, Maisie responds by saying, “‘He won’t do it. Not first’” (James, *Maisie* 132). She knows, as is evident by this comment, that Sir Claude will not be the one to initiate this action, and she consistently reminds the others of this. John R. Bradley, in discussing some of James’s male characters, says, “The novels and stories are populated with men for whom successful, open sexual relationships in adulthood have proved, as in his own life, impossible. Where

male characters demonstrate an active interest in, if not necessarily a passion for, beautiful women, they are usually inept, self-conscious and seemingly crippled by the prospect – like the suggestively named Winterbourne in ‘Daisy Miller’ (1869), who analyses, categorises and objectifies, but never acts” (55). This description is one that fits not only James’s Sir Claude, but Howells’ Ben Halleck too. Both figures are to an extent “crippled” as a result of divorce, for it is divorce that shatters the familiar ground on which they attempt to base their identity. In divorcing Ida, Sir Claude would be forced to disavow a certain image of manhood that he strives to uphold and embody.

Thus, in an attempt to keep his identity intact, to remove himself from the presence of those forces which threaten to undo him, he at one point runs off like Halleck. His decision to flee comes immediately after Ida leaves him, and he exclaims, “I’m free – I’m free” (James, *Maisie* 180). This exclamation coupled with a sense of sudden movement gives us an image of the man floundering to recoup what has been lost as he attempts to rescue Maisie (and the housemaid) from abandonment with an archaic sense of gallantry. In the final pages of the novel, we are again presented with a maternal image of him attempting to care for the child. While on the boat, we learn that “he sociably sat with his stepdaughter’s head in his lap and that of Mrs Beale’s housemaid fairly pillowed on his breast” (James, *Maisie* 181). The fact that he sits “sociably” suggests that he is comfortable in this scene. It is a scene marked by a softness reinforced by James’s use of the word “pillowed.” This softness is a quality that James admires, but it is a quality that he imagines divorce threatens. It is also one that leads society to marginalize this figure. In the end, Sir Claude passively gives up Maisie and ultimately his identity as a “family man.” To show us what he values in this figure, though, James

focuses our attention on what is gained rather than on what is lost, for in the end it is Sir Claude's nurturance that gives Maisie the confidence to make the decision to leave, to focus on her growth as an individual. As Allen F. Stein observes, "Maisie will now chart her own course" (124).

Hence, in this final passage we again are presented with James's conflicted attitude toward both the figure of Sir Claude and toward the subject of divorce. With Maisie, we see the potential for growth, for creation, for possibilities – a potential that James as an artist valued and one that he attributes in this novel to Sir Claude's interest in the child. With this figure, however, we also see the potential for destruction as James shows us how this character's already fragile state is further undone by societal shifts that divorce encouraged. In essence, James, through his depiction of Sir Claude, shows us how divorce threatened a particular type of manhood defined by qualities that James valued on both an aesthetic and social level, but the subject matter brings these qualities into conflict with one another, which we see at the levels of both form and theme. A close look at this marginal character and his fractured sense of manhood thus brings these conflicts for James the artist to the forefront.

## CHAPTER 4

### AN 'UNFORTUNATE ARRANGEMENT': DIVORCE AND ITS LIMITATIONS IN WHARTON'S *THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY*

In Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, we meet another well-educated and affluent male who suffers immensely when faced with a divorce. Ralph Marvell, like Howell's Ben Halleck and James's Sir Claude, is a marginal figure. He is of the old order, the elite New York aristocracy, and much like Halleck he is presented as weak and ineffectual, as crumbling from the weight of the moral conflict that divorce heightens and thrusts in his face. Unlike Halleck or Sir Claude, however, Ralph Marvell actually marries and experiences a divorce. This is a divorce that he is forced into against his will by a domineering woman, much in the same way as Sir Claude. He also holds a prominent (but increasingly tenuous) position in society's most sought-after circle, a social status that the crippled Halleck, despite hailing from one of Boston's older families, never quite attains. When divorce forces him to confront his inherited values, these values fail him, and he ends up taking his own life, making it "all right" for Undine in the end (Wharton, *Custom* 376). With his demise, we see Undine's rise, and Wharton crafts a critique of both the old mode, represented here by Ralph, and the new one, represented by Undine, exploring thematically by way of their marriage (and subsequent divorce) the difficulties surrounding a possible merger of the two.

Throughout the novel, Wharton thus explores the limitations and opportunities associated with divorce, but she approaches the subject a bit differently than either

Howells or James. Whereas Howells, with his aesthetic of the common, recognized the democratic potential of divorce on both an aesthetic and social level, no one in his novel profits by it as they do here. James, meanwhile, as both an author and a social being, was wary of this potential that Howells admired, proclaiming instead that difference or variety was what granted the novelist his or her subject while simultaneously upholding a belief in traditions and customs inherently built on a hierarchy that divorce threatened to dismantle.

Wharton examines the costs of limiting ourselves to either view. With *Undine*, Wharton shows us the mobility proffered by divorce and alludes to the democratic potential that Howells admired. With *Ralph*, we see James's fears realized. Divorce, as Wharton illustrates, gives Undine the opportunity to start anew, to remarry. These new marriages grant her entry into arenas previously restricted to her and enable her movement up the social ladder. With each advancement, however, she levels the playing field and is forced to keep striving for something bigger and better, something previously unattainable, leaving behind a trail of refuse most poignantly represented here by *Ralph*. His is a family that depends on marriage in order to maintain an elite insular solidarity that marks them as *different* from others. In his circle, divorce functions as a limitation, not an advantageous opportunity. It fosters a plurality, a steadily shifting scene, that disrupts a former way of life and ultimately brings ruin to *Ralph*.

This novel, which was begun in 1907 and written over a span of six years, was the product of what Hermione Lee calls "a difficult period" in Wharton's life (427). When it first began to appear in serial form in 1913, Edith Wharton was in the process of pursuing a divorce herself. The subject then is one that interested her on a personal level. For

Wharton the author it held a different sort of appeal. These varied interests converge in her depiction of the troubled Ralph, and a close look at this figure reveals the difficulties that Wharton encountered in taking up this volatile subject. As a realist, Wharton strove to present readers with “facts,” explaining that “the ‘literary artist,’ unlike the ‘professional moralist,’ allows the reader to ‘draw his own conclusions from the facts presented’” (qtd. in Thomas 9). What is problematic for Wharton is the inability to fully detach herself from this morally ripe subject to which she could personally relate. Further, divorce, highlights what Kaplan calls “fragmented and competing social realities,” making it ever more difficult to capture the elusive “facts” to which she refers (9).

Through her portrayal of Ralph, Wharton reveals her own conflicted response toward the established customs and conventions that he represents. On a personal level, she could sympathize with this enfeebled figure and his struggle; on a professional level she found his conflict appealing, and even necessary. Wharton thus finds herself reliant on the very world she critiques. Her divided attitude, symbolically rendered by the divorce itself, creates a tension in the text marked, or dramatized, by Ralph’s conflict.

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Aesthetically, Wharton, like James, recognized a certain appeal in structuring her novels around a complicating factor, represented here by divorce. This is evident in the earliest of her works. In *A Backward Glance*, she recalls her first attempt as an author:

My first attempt (at the age of eleven) was a novel, which began: “ ‘Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?’ said Mrs. Tompkins. ‘If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room’.” Timorously I submitted this to my mother, and never shall I forget the



sudden drop of my creative frenzy when she returned it with the icy comment: 'Drawing-rooms are always tidy.' (73)

This recollection demonstrates Wharton's interest as an author in exploring (and exposing) what lies beneath the "tidy" surface. As Susan Fraiman notes, "Even as a child, Wharton seems to have recognized that stories actually require a certain amount of mess to get them going" (482). The subject of divorce thematically and stylistically provides her with just that – a "mess." We see this on a structural level with the number of marriages and subsequent divorces that create a steadily shifting scene and a plurality of situations. We see this on a thematic level as Wharton explores divorce as a social threat to the already collapsing structural and moral foundations of society.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton comments on how "Drama, situation, is made out of the conflicts thus produced between social order and individual appetites" (13). Divorce, as Wharton shows us, creates such a conflict for Ralph, who, despite ultimately finding himself governed by his inherited beliefs and the pressures of the "social order" to which he belongs, embodies a range of conflicting positions on the issue shaped by his resistance to these beliefs and pressures. What complicates this further is that Wharton, through her depiction of Ralph, reveals that she too grappled with the conflict to which she alludes in *The Writing of Fiction* between social forces and individual desires. This is evident even in recalling this early attempt at writing. This recollection demonstrates a longing for her mother's approval, but also an awareness, as she shares the story "timorously," that her work was not likely to be received well. Her mother's harsh reaction and "icy comment" reveal an adherence to social codes that allows no places for the sense of freedom and abandon characterizing a "creative frenzy." These codes, she suggests, are stifling.

In her later years, however, Wharton came to value this very sense of tradition that she as a youth wanted to move beyond. In her autobiography, she notes that

The value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of change, and sociologists without a drop of American blood in them have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of our country. Even negatively, these traditions have acquired, with the passing of time, an unsuspected value. When I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate; and I should like to atone for my unappreciativeness by trying to revive that faint fragrance. (Wharton, *Backward Glance* 5)

In this passage, Wharton speaks directly of her respect for the traditions of her youth, yet she also acknowledges that this respect did not come easy. She speaks of a time when she regarded them as “empty” and meaningless, but recognizes in her older age that they have in fact contributed to the “moral wealth” of America. Ralph follows a similar trajectory in the novel, but Wharton succeeds where he does not.

Wharton, unlike Ralph, refused to let herself be bound, socially or professionally, by the codes that Ralph finds himself up against. Dianne L. Chambers says, “Wharton valued the conservative traditions by which she was raised and, later in life, explicitly lamented the passing of old New York. But she also refused to accept the limitations imposed by that rigid world on her gender” (26-27). Her decision to pursue a career as an author attests to this.

While not as eager to self-identify as a realist as Howells or even the more ambivalent James, Wharton often wrote works that fit comfortably within the realist rubric. As Kaplan explains, “Although Wharton did not espouse realism as a cause, as Howells did, writing realistically was implicit in her more pronounced struggle to define

the nature of professional authorship. Like Howells, she viewed writing as work rather than leisure and treated realism as a tenuous balancing act negating the idealism of genteel culture while resisting the sentimentalism of mass culture” (66). This “struggle” is best seen in this novel through her depiction of Ralph as a representative of “genteel culture,” and divorce, presented here as a feature of “mass culture.” Wharton, though, presents Ralph’s inherited values as being more closely aligned with the sentimental (or a romantic view of the past), while the forward-thinking, newly rich Undine evinces a certain idealism that we can better associate with the future (or an aggressive masculinity), rather than the “genteel.”<sup>40</sup> Wharton thus complicates this dichotomy and illustrates the blurring of boundaries between the private and public realms, a shift that was set in motion many years before, but one that only became more pronounced in the early part of the 1900s with the increase of divorce.<sup>41</sup>

Given the implications, divorce functions as what Wharton calls a “good subject.” In *The Writing of Fiction*, she explains, “A good subject [. . .] must contain in it self something that sheds a light on our moral experience”; otherwise, it is what she calls “meaningless” (Wharton, *Writing* 28). With this statement, she upholds her vision of writing as work, as something that proffers a significant contribution to society. It

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<sup>40</sup> Hildegard Hoeller comments on Wharton’s sense of professionalism, observing that “Wharton herself, in her public statements and critical prose, participated in the creation of ‘Wharton the realist.’ And yet throughout her fiction she also negotiated the limitations of the realist method and explored the possibilities of the sentimental tradition” (x). Kimberly Freeman acknowledges this too, suggesting that Wharton explores realism’s “advantages and limitations” in this novel (64). Freeman, however, asserts that Wharton does so specifically through the character Charles Bowen (64). While Bowen may function as something of a mouthpiece for realism in this novel, Ralph’s conflict better reflects Wharton’s own and helps us understand the complexities that shape it. Further, we can read this exploration as accounting for her inability to wholeheartedly critique or sympathize with Ralph.

<sup>41</sup> In *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*, Elaine Tyler May comments on this shift, noting that “After 1900, the communal values of sacrifice, voluntarism, and virtuous domesticity were seriously shaken by the rise of urban culture, which brought altered sex roles and post-Victorian expectations of marriage and family” (49).

therefore becomes important to consider the significance of Ralph's conflict, or struggle, and the way in which he is forced to test his morals in a society where, as Debra MacComb observes, market values were replacing moral ones. In speaking of conflicts, Wharton says, "there must be something that *makes* them crucial, some recognizable relation to a familiar social or moral standard, some explicit awareness of the eternal struggle between man's contending impulses [. . .]" (Wharton, *Writing* 14). Divorce, Wharton recognized, is just that – a struggle between "contending impulses." With divorce, there is often an upheaval of those "familiar social or moral standard[s]," making it more difficult to identify that "recognizable relation" to those principles and beliefs around which we shape our identity. Divorce, in this novel, is depicted as creating such a severance for Ralph, who suffers a perceived loss of manhood and class status as a result.

As an artist, Wharton recognized the importance of past principles. In *The Writing of Fiction*, she notes that "The sense of form – already defined as the order, in time and importance, in which the narrated incidents are grouped – is, in all the arts, specifically of the class, the Latin tradition" (34-35). Here, she identifies "sense of form" with "tradition," with a past that she as a realist looked beyond, creating complications that emerge most clearly in the figure of Ralph, the idle gentleman who functions as a representative of a past that was becoming obsolete in Wharton's present day. Wharton, by depicting Ralph's loss of identity, or more specifically his loss of manhood, throughout the novel, explores the costs of a society that rejects what she saw as its foundations. As rupture to traditional form, divorce thus functions on one hand as a symbolic representation of this rejection that Wharton explores on a thematic level, enabling her social critique of the crass consumerism that she imagines threatens to

destroy the world that Ralph inhabits, but Ralph's world is one that she critiques as well. As Kaplan further explains, "For Wharton and her contemporaries, professionalization involved the rejection and revision of older genteel models of authorship, which treated writing as the leisurely activity of the man of letters rather than as disciplined work" (68). Ralph, in this novel, engages in the type of leisurely writing from which Wharton, in an attempt to define herself as a realist, or professional, wanted to figuratively divorce herself. This type of leisurely writing is marked by a sense of excess that she sought to avoid.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton advocates the use of "economy of material" (56). She does so by comparing "the writing of fiction [. . .] to the administering of a fortune," explaining that "Economy and expenditure must each bear a part in it, but they should never degenerate into parsimony or waste. True economy consists in the drawing out of one's subject of every drop of significance it can give, true expenditure in devoting time, meditation and patient labour to the process of extraction and representation" (57). Here, she reveals a belief in moderation, stressing that a balance between "economy and expenditure" is important and one that requires great care and attention. As she delineates, "economy of material" is a product of work, a "process" marked by method. It requires a devotion to "time" and "labour" in an effort to guard against "waste." Her preference for economy over waste, for work over idleness, recalls Howells's and even James's. In *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*, Hildegard Hoeller says, "As the spokesman for American realism, Howells uses the terms *economy* and *excess* to advertise realism's proportionate view of the world to correct the falsifying, excessive vision of the sentimental" (13). She further says, "Like Howells, James

associates ‘old sentimental values’ with ‘waste,’ even the ‘maximum of waste’ and ‘perversion.’ And James’s aesthetic, like Howells’s or Wharton’s, also serves as ‘security against waste’” (18). In this novel, Wharton positions Ralph’s idleness and emotional excess as waste.

Yet amidst her critique of this figure, who represents on some levels what she aesthetically devalues, an emergent sympathy becomes apparent. As Debra MacComb observes, Undine “characterizes her situation [her marriage to Ralph] as a ‘waste,’” positioning him as little more than refuse in a consumer driven society (146). In this refuse, Wharton recognizes something useful, something worth preserving.

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Like Howells’s Ben Halleck and James’s Sir Claude, Ralph embodies a genteel style of manhood that had largely gone out of fashion by the early part of the twentieth century. It is a style of manhood marked by a quiet and refined demeanor, one that stands in contrast to the “strenuous life,” or the “virile, hard-driving manhood” advocated by Roosevelt around the turn of the century (Bederman 184). We see this when the narrator describes how Undine, at the Fairford dinner party, sits next to “young Marvell, who struck her as very ‘sweet’ (it was her word for friendliness), but even shyer than at the hotel dance. Yet she was not sure if he were shy, or if his quietness were only a new kind of self-possession which expressed itself negatively instead of aggressively. Small, well-knit, fair, he sat stroking his slight blond mustache and looking at her with kindly, almost tender eyes; but he left it to his sister and the others to draw her out and fit her into the pattern” (Wharton, *Custom* 27). Here, Marvell is, like Sir Claude, described as possessing

“tender eyes.” With his pale hair and “fair” skin, Marvell resembles what many during this time period feared was the result of “cultural feminization” (Kimmel 24). He is quiet and “sweet,” rather than hard and forceful. He is “small” and “well-knit,” rather than large and rough. Further, he possesses a “self-restraint” which “sobered” Undine, leading her to take a tone of “frankness” with him (Wharton, *Custom* 55).

This sense of “self-restraint” is one that manifests itself in his frugality and conservative stance on social issues. It also shapes his marital expectations. As Elizabeth Ammons explains, being “of the stable aboriginal class,” he “desire[s] a wife who will display conspicuous leisure for a small group of people rather than conspicuous consumption for the masses” (337). He has no desire to flaunt his affluent state before the “masses” and therefore does little to secure additional wealth, which in the end further jeopardizes his family’s once “stable” position in society and encourages his movement toward society’s margins. Even Undine realizes, after three years of marriage, that she “had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous; that she was in the case of those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause” (Wharton, *Custom* 153). Undine upholds the distinction between what Ralph calls the natives, “exclusive,” but “dowdy” for their staunch commitment to tradition, and the “Invaders,” who engaged in what Veblen calls “conspicuous consumption.” Hence, Wharton situates Ralph, and the aristocracy to which he belongs, as a “fallen cause,” as lacking the strength needed to survive in the changing times.

Ralph is what R.W.B. Lewis calls a “gentle and vulnerable representative of the older New York” (348). This description aptly captures Ralph’s increasingly marginal status in society. Here, Lewis identifies him as “gentle” – a word that carries classed

implications, as in “gentleman.” It suggests he is non-threatening, which in turn makes him “vulnerable” to stronger forces and affirms that he is losing hold of his already tenuous position in society. Moreover, the word “gentle” imbues Ralph with a softness typically associated with the feminine, a softness that had come to characterize this older version of manhood with which Ralph is most closely aligned. As Undine tells her father, “with their aristocratic ideas they look down on a man who works for a living. Of course it’s all right for *you* to do it, because you’re not a Marvell or a Dagonet; but they think Ralph ought to just lie back and let you support the baby and me” (Wharton, *Custom* 190). Though Undine, at this point in the text, is attempting to make a case against Ralph, she clearly recapitulates his family’s views regarding work, which is frowned upon, and makes a class-based distinction between her newly rich family, the results of an aggressive (masculine) pursuit, and Ralph’s.

Ralph lacks the “accumulated wealth, power, and capital” which defined what Kimmel calls “Marketplace Manhood” that emerged in the 1830s (13). This is the “wealth, power, and capital” that people like Elmer Moffatt and Peter Van Degen are able to attain. In contrast, “the gentility of the old gentry [to which Ralph belongs] is now ridiculed as the effeminacy of the urban dandy and fop” (Kimmel 14). He is thus presented as weak, as faltering in the face of change. When the monetary demands of his wife force him to enter the business world, he finds that his leisured lifestyle, quiet demeanor, and gentle nature are no match for the success-driven entrepreneurs of the corporate environment. The narrator describes how “the long hours of mechanical drudgery were telling on his active body and undisciplined nerves. He had begun too late to subject himself to the persistent mortification of spirit and flesh which is a condition of



the average business life” (Wharton, *Custom* 245-246). The business world enervates him, both emotionally and physically; the “persistent” or repetitive tasks are described as “mechanical drudgery,” indicating that such work reduces the individual to an anonymity among the masses. This, Ralph acknowledges, is a feature of the “average” life, which he positions himself above. To enter the business world is to diminish the exclusivity of his society. Even Mr. Dagonet, in discussing financial arrangements with Mr. Spragg for Ralph and his new bride, observes, “It will pay us both in the end to keep him out of business” (Wharton, *Custom* 96). In his appeal to Mr. Spragg, Mr. Dagonet strategically adopts the use of economic language. He speaks to Undine’s father on terms that he would find familiar by arguing that preventing Ralph from entering the business world would give them both the best return. He recognizes that his family’s name is valuable and expresses fears that entering the business world would make it less so. Wharton’s presentation of Ralph as a failure demonstrates her attempts to distance herself, as a professional, from his leisured lifestyle, his idleness – to divest herself of these and other similar associations.

Ralph’s increasingly marginalized status is ultimately reinforced by the way in which Undine tosses him to the side. Wharton traces this movement throughout. Upon first meeting him, we find that he belongs to an elite, almost elusive, society of New York aristocrats to which Undine is initially drawn. As Mrs. Heeny says, Ralph Marvell is “in it” (Wharton, *Custom* 51). He is, what she calls, the “real thing” (Wharton, *Custom* 78). With this description, Wharton positions Ralph as something of a valuable archaic rarity and alludes to a society that was quickly vanishing in her present day, a fact of which Ralph is well aware. We learn, for example, that he “sometimes called his mother

and grandfather the Aborigines, and likened them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race. He was fond of describing Washington Square as the ‘Reservation’, and of prophesying that before long its inhabitants would be exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries” (Wharton, *Custom* 58). By referring to his elders as the “Aborigines,” Ralph upholds Mrs. Heeny’s view that they are the “real thing,” natives of the place, the elusive originals after which high society in New York is fashioned, and as we see in this passage, he is acutely aware that his position in society is threatened by a new, more aggressive (masculine) and less refined class, which he terms the “invading race.” Here, he acknowledges a distinct difference – both classed and gendered -- between himself and these others as he reveals a passive acceptance of his increasingly marginalized status in society, recognizing (but implicitly hoping otherwise) that he and his family are “doomed.” He affirms this recognition and feeble hope by stripping his family of any autonomy when he likens its individuals to artifacts that one might find on display in an exhibition, frozen forever in time as they engage in what he calls “primitive industries,” but marked by a historical significance that warrants display in a museum and one that alludes to what Wharton values in this figure that modern society rejects.

Nevertheless, she implicitly critiques the sentimental outlook that shapes this passive acceptance of his state. Instead of bemoaning his movement to the margins of society, he romanticizes the decline, drawing an analogy to the Native Americans who were driven from their own land. His use of the word “pathetic” is telling and contributes to the poignant picture that he creates of a family unwilling (unable, even) to let go of a

past rendered feeble by society. As his cousin Clare says to him, “You and I are both completely out-of-date” (Wharton, *Custom* 353). Deeply enmeshed in tradition, they are of a class that Wharton presents as vulnerable to displacement by the modernizing forces from which they have remained aloof.

She thus characterizes Ralph as weak, as embodying a refined sense of leisure that had come to be regarded as a form of “overcivilized effeminacy” (Bederman 186). Having studied law, for example, Ralph is well-educated, but he does not actively maintain a practice, preferring instead to spend his time writing poetry. As a result, he has no income, and when he marries Undine his grandfather and father-in-law make arrangements to provide for the young couple. We learn that

Nothing in the Dagonet and Marvell tradition was opposed to this desultory dabbling with life. For four or five generations it had been the rule of both houses that a young fellow should go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction. The only essential was that he should live ‘like a gentleman’ – that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two fixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and ‘business’ honour. (Wharton, *Custom* 59)

In this passage, Wharton shows us the pull of tradition that shapes Ralph’s conflict. It is a tradition so deeply ingrained in the family, for generation after generation, that it has solidified into a “rule” to which he is bound. Ralph Marvell is expected to live a life of “cultivated inaction.” This is a life reminiscent of those genteel patriarchs of old, a type of figure that had fallen by the wayside long ago. Wharton affirms society’s view of such men as old-fashioned by acknowledging Ralph’s “archaic probity,” a sense of honesty and uprightness valuable in its own right, but one that she suggests will not get him, or men like him, far in the modern emergent world of business.

Ralph's is the society into which Wharton was born. In *A Backward Glance*, she identifies, in speaking of this society, "two standards of importance [. . .], that of education and good manners, and of scrupulous probity in business and private affairs" (21). Rather than risk compromising the family's moral integrity by encouraging Ralph to enter the cutthroat world of business, his family instead suggests that he avoid it to better preserve their exclusivity from any perceived threats. Wharton's biographer Hermione Lee notes, "The more threatened the old upper class was by the influx of new money and new names in the 1880s and '90s, the more it tried to protect and perpetuate itself through strict, formulaic codes of the acceptable – codes based on a whole cluster of unexamined assumptions about how money is made, who should have it and how it should be spent" (52-53). Ralph, as we shall see, finds himself bound to these codes.

These are codes that he attempts to resist as a youth, and with this resistance we are introduced to the internal conflict that takes shape in the face of divorce. During a reflective moment Ralph has after a conversation with Popple, the fashionable portrait painter, he thinks:

Small, cautious, middle-class, had been the ideals of aboriginal New York; but it suddenly struck the young man that they were singularly coherent and respectable as contrasted with the chaos of indiscriminate appetites which made up its modern tendencies. He too had wanted to be 'modern,' had revolted, half-humorously, against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code; and it must have been by one of the ironic reversions of heredity that, at this precise point, he began to see what there was to be said on the other side – *his* side, as he now felt it to be. (Wharton, *Custom* 58)

In this moment, Ralph contrasts himself and his family – "aboriginal New York" – with all things "modern." He identifies the unwavering "old code" as appealing in the midst of what he terms "chaos," despite its "restrictions and exclusions," its inherent resistance to

change. Yet he “too” had “revolted” in his youth against it, but only “half-humorously,” suggesting an early awareness, if not consciously realized, of an inability to overcome these forces of “heredity.” In “The Noyade of Marriage in Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country*,” Alexandra Collins observes that “Even before life has offered him any difficulties, he regards himself, rather pessimistically, as a victim of the forces of heredity, and he longs to escape from the inadequacies of his personal past. From his parents and ancestors, Ralph has inherited customs which uphold personal privacy, integrity, restrained manners, and educated tastes. [. . .] His class is becoming archaic, but he cannot escape his involvement, for its values are an integral part of his being” (200). Ralph, early in the novel, is aware that these beliefs have shaped his existence; they are beliefs from which he has tried (but failed) to escape.

Wharton thus presents Ralph as being ill-equipped to survive in the ever changing modern world. In speaking of him (and his values), the narrator says, “No equipment could more thoroughly have unfitted the modern youth for getting on: it hardly needed the scribbled pages on the desk to complete the hopelessness of Ralph Marvell’s case. He had accepted the fact with a humorous fatalism” (Wharton, *Custom* 59). Here, Wharton stresses Ralph’s passive acceptance of his fallen state and directly comments on his archaic status in society. She presents him as a “case,” as a relic to be studied, and asserts that his “equipment,” those values on which he has been raised, have “unfitted” him for society.

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One indication of Ralph's unfitness lies in the multiple "pages" of "scribbles" he produces, the results of his idly dabbling with poetry. Throughout the novel, Wharton equates these "scribbles," which she presents as lacking both worth and value, with a sentimental outlook that stands in opposition to her realist aesthetic and consequently shapes her critique of this figure. He is, we learn, given to "sylvan abandonments" (Wharton, *Custom* 113). While on his honeymoon with Undine, for example, he wants nothing more than to spend his days traipsing through the Italian countryside, waiting on his muse, which he associates with the feminine, to alight. We see this while he sits under a tree with Undine, studying her hand. At this point, the narrator describes how "The upper world had vanished: his universe had shrunk to the palm of a hand. But there was no sense of diminution. In the mystic depths whence his passion sprang, earthly dimensions were ignored and the curve of beauty was boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it. Ralph had never felt more convinced of his power to write a great poem; but now it was Undine's hand which held the magic wand of expression" (Wharton, *Custom* 113).

In the early stages of marriage, Ralph envisions Undine as his muse and adopts a romantic vision of poetic inspiration contrary to Wharton's vision of writing as work. Ralph imagines that the words will simply come to him with the touch of a "magic wand." The emphasis here is on "expression," "imagination," and "beauty," not cold, hard facts that would characterize the business, or professional, world, which Wharton as an author had succeeded in entering. Wharton furthers this contrast by presenting Ralph as being out of touch with "earthly dimensions," as living instead for a dated (romantic) ideal. In this manner, he thus passively (idly) waits for his muse to come to him, rather

than actively pursuing it as a professional author would. Ralph's vision of the whole writing process is starry-eyed, and Wharton, by presenting him as being out of touch with reality, as living too much in the ideal, critiques this view, suggesting that it is not so. As Kaplan explains, "In the late nineteenth century, the idea of authorship as a profession enabled writers to steer clear of the stigma of the ineffectual dilettante, without reducing them to the level of the common worker" (68). In this novel, Ralph functions as a representative of the "ineffectual dilettante" from which Wharton, as a professional author, had distanced herself.

She presents him as an aesthete whose understanding of manhood is shaped by a dated romantic vision, which she suggests clouds his ability to act and ultimately contributes to his collapse and to the impending downfall of the aristocracy to which his family belongs. We see that he clings to elements of the Victorian code, for example, including the notion that he must "protect the purity of his spouse" (May 28). Early on in the novel, he imagines that he is a knight in shining armor, aiming to save and protect Undine from the perils of what he considers vulgar materialism. As Collins notes, "his courtship of Undine has a fairy-tale quality" (201). In thinking of her, he wonders, "To save her from Van Degen and Van Degenism: was that really to be his mission – the 'call' for which his life had obscurely waited?" (Wharton, *Custom* 64). Here, Ralph again positions himself as idle, as waiting, but poised to take on the more active role of savior.

While Wharton, who shares some of these same sentiments regarding what he calls "Van Degenism," admires his desire, she critiques the way in which he romanticizes the situation, the way in which he imagines that he is on a "mission," or a romantic quest, to save Undine from the materialism that defines the new upper class, which he considers

a threat to his own. Kaplan observes that “both the nouveau riche and the working class were perceived as pressuring and threatening an insular social world whose economic base and social power were becoming more and more insecure” (68). This insecurity manifests itself in the timid Ralph, who only *imagines* a grand rescue of this “social world.” As the narrator tells us, “he seemed to see her [Undine] like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse – just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce – to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue . . .” (Wharton, *Custom* 66). He envisions himself a hero swooping in to rescue a maiden in distress. As Collins observes, Ralph hopes that “he will save her [Undine] from the clutches of other, less worthy suitors, and in saving her, restore his own self esteem” (201). In this way it becomes clear that Ralph’s sense of manhood, presented as being damaged and in need of mending, is dependent in part on a spouse. He believes that having someone to save and protect will restore his fractured sense of self, but Wharton the realist breaks this romantic vision, showing us that taking Undine as his wife actually further destroys him. As Ammons observes, he acts on the assumption that “Undine wants to be rescued and will adopt his unostentatious life-style, his taste in people, and his educated aestheticism” (333). He is so enthralled by this vision that he is blind to the fact that he is attempting to rescue Undine from the very thing she wants. He even imagines society as a “monster,” a fictional creature, which he must slay in order to stay afloat and in imagining society as such further draws a distinction between modern forces and his antiquated way of life. He is, as Margaret McDowell says, “imprisoned by a code of romantic chivalry which prevents him from honestly evaluating his wife until it is too late” (529). McDowell’s use



of the word “imprisoned” speaks to Ralph’s conflict. This “code” is one from which he cannot escape, and Wharton suggests that it hinders his ability to see reality clearly because he lives too much in the ideal. Even though Ralph imagines himself a hero who will swoop in and save, Wharton ultimately depicts him as the one who needs to be saved from becoming obsolete.

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In Ralph, Wharton recognizes something of value. He embodies qualities that Wharton admired, including privacy, honesty, and commitment. His conservative frugality appeals to Wharton’s artistic sense of economy, or her distaste for excess, rather, while his honesty in the business world and his commitment to his wife, despite Undine’s transgressions, appeal to her desire as a realist to present life as she saw it. This honesty, Wharton suggests, is rooted in the traditions of his youth. These are traditions shaping the social critique that is present in this novel. With Ralph, we see a commitment to principle, to a previously solidified tradition of the past, broken, as Wharton suggests, by the transience that both the marketplace and divorce encouraged. This transience is best illustrated here through her depiction of Undine’s multiple marriages and divorces, motivated by financial and social gain, which for Undine are intertwined. Thus Wharton presents us with a glimpse of how values in society were shifting and explores divorce as both cause and effect. With Undine’s rise and Ralph’s decline, we see money, wealth, and capital (quick production and consumption) taking the place of a meaningful moral experience.

The result is that Wharton's critique of Ralph is infused with a sympathy which we cannot overlook. Collins observes that Wharton's "sympathy seems to rest with Undine's dilettante husband" and that "Ralph's view of marriage pervades the novel" (199). McDowell, in *Edith Wharton*, notes that Wharton departs from the story's dominant satirical tone in her depiction of Ralph. She says, "In praising the consistency of tone in this satirical comedy, we must except the presentation of Ralph Marvell. Wharton has presented his suicide and its attendant circumstances with such intensity that the sequences involving him depart from her characteristic impersonal mode in this novel" (54). That Wharton largely exempts him from her satire speaks to the significance of this character and the role that he plays in advancing Wharton's critique of the world that destroys him. As Richard Lawson aptly states, "Ralph is a failure. He arouses our sympathy as does no other character in *The Custom of the Country*" (52). Beverly Hume acknowledges this as well, asserting that Wharton "is not unsympathetic to Marvell's dilemma and may even have used him to work through some of her personal conflicts" (139). While Wharton's social upbringing and her experience as a divorcée contribute to her sympathetic portrayal of this figure, it is important to look beyond "personal conflicts" of this nature to the way in which they converge with her professional interests. Despite Wharton's attempts to remain detached from this figure in an effort to uphold her aesthetic beliefs, we find that the same aesthetic beliefs that shape her critique of this figure also partly drive her sympathy for him.

Because divorce entails a rejection of past principles, which Wharton valued on both an artistic and social level, Ralph falters in its face, and Wharton sympathetically presents him as a wounded man. When Ralph receives news of the impending divorce, he

becomes physically ill, much in the same way that Howells's Halleck does. When he awakens from a long drawn out sickness, "the first thing he remembered was the fact of having cried. [. . .] He could not think how he had come to be such a fool. He hoped to heaven no one had seen him" (Wharton, *Custom* 257). His first thoughts upon regaining a semi-lucid state of consciousness are of his emotional response to Undine's request for a divorce and his embarrassment over the matter. In this way, Wharton presents him as both emotionally and physically weak, yet sympathetic. He even struggles to open his eyes: "Just now there was a dead weight on them; he tried one after another in vain. The effort set him weakly trembling, and he wanted to cry again. Nonsense! He must get out of bed" (Wharton, *Custom* 258). As he struggles to get out of bed, he finds that he is not strong enough to withstand the force of the "dead weight" that is the reality of his life, and this causes him much chagrin. Thus he reprimands himself, and this self-corrective is telling in that it identifies what he regards as the correct (manly) response to the situation. Ralph, however, is not able to muster the strength at this time in order to act in this manner; the grief, anguish, and embarrassment consume him, both physically and emotionally.

Like his family, he aligns reality with a modernity from which he remains detached. Ticien Marie Sassoubre attributes this to his upper class status, arguing that "Ralph's culturally conditioned responses to both people and objects have actually deprived him of anything 'real and his own in life '" (694). She goes on to identify this deprivation as a "consequence of a reified liberal idea of the self as prior to and privileged above the outside world" (Sassoubre 694). Kaplan comments on this link between reality and class status as well, noting that for the realist Howells, "upper-class

domesticity epitomizes unreality” (70).<sup>42</sup> Wharton, throughout her depiction of Ralph, explores this idea on a thematic level as she actively participates in the creation of this reality on an artistic level.

While Ralph lies on his sickbed, we learn that “So indistinct were the boundaries between thought and action that he really felt himself moving about the room, in a queer disembodied way, as one treads the air in sleep” (Wharton, *Custom* 258). Here, he is described as feeling “disembodied,” as being disconnected from his physical reality because of an inability to distinguish between these “indistinct” boundaries – the values on which he has built an understanding give way. The fact that he is described as treading air suggests that he is in a constant struggle to stay afloat, but even the water is absent here. He wants to get up, literally from bed, and rise above the sickness and emotional trauma, but he lacks the strength to do so, and an unidentified hand keeps pushing him down, again showing his weakness. Thus, “He lay there for a long time, in a silent blackness far below light and sound; then he gradually floated to the surface with the buoyancy of a dead body. But his body had never been more alive. Jagged strokes of pain tore through it, hands dragged at it with nails that bit like teeth” (Wharton, *Custom* 258). This news makes him feel like he is drowning; it numbs him physically to the point of deadness and takes him to a place of “blackness,” far removed from the world of “light and sound,” of life. Yet despite the deadness, the inability to move his limbs on his own accord, he feels the pain with violent force. It is depicted as being the only real thing in

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<sup>42</sup> In *Edith Wharton*, Richard Lawson also comments on this sense of unreality shaping Ralph’s existence, describing him as “an uncomprehending visitor from another planet. A true Wharton hero, ‘his profession was the least real thing in his life.’ Typically, his profession, or more accurately, nonprofession, is law. And while the law may well be the last real thing in his life, his is a life so full of unreality that one more unreal dimension is hardly that important. Ralph not only quotes poetry, he quotes esoteric and abstruse poetry. To make more money, for Undine and the approbation of Undine, he joins a real-estate firm. His partners tolerate him because of his advantageous social connections” (51).

his state of semi-consciousness, and this pain is directly linked to divorce. Collins notes that “Ralph becomes symbolically a drowned man.” Without Undine, he “loses his life force” (207). Because his identity is dependent in part on his wife, this loss forces him to redefine himself. In speaking of “Wharton’s sympathetic treatment of [. . .] Ralph,” Freeman positions both Ralph and Raymond (Undine’s third husband) as “victims of the past, weakened by their adherence to romance and heritage because they are blind to the power of the changes, however vulgar and quotidian, taking place around them” (63). Ralph is not “blind” to these changes as Freeman asserts; rather, Wharton depicts him as lacking the strength to contest them. His inherited values, marked throughout by a sentimental vision, are too weak to give him the strength he needs to withstand the shock of divorce; meanwhile, Wharton presents the divorce itself as a modern threat – so forceful that it leads to his ultimate collapse.

Ralph’s family does not approve of divorce. As Jennifer Haytock observes, “In Wharton’s novels about old New York, marriage, satisfactory or not, is treated by characters as a permanent condition; despite adultery, financial impropriety, or boredom, one remained married to one’s spouse” (219). This “old New York” to which Haytock refers regarded divorce as a threat. Ralph initially fails to see it as such. When Undine first mentions the subject at a dinner party, Ralph laughs. He brushes it off and in doing so reveals a vulnerability marked by a sense of naivety and idealism. His mother, in response, says, ““I believe in certain parts of the country such – unfortunate arrangements – are beginning to be tolerated. But in New York, in spite of our growing indifference, a divorced woman is still – thank heaven! – at a decided disadvantage” (Wharton, *Custom* 75). Ralph’s mother’s attitude toward divorce is apparent. She does not tolerate it, despite

its increasing acceptance, and she shows her disdain when she refers to such arrangements as “unfortunate.” She maintains instead a faith in the solidity of tradition, which cements her position in society. She affirms this with her exclamation that a divorcée is at a “decided disadvantage” in society’s most sought after circles. As MacComb explains, “While divorce most certainly secures the interests of social climbers and profits those who capitalize upon its business opportunities, it also has its uses among the old guard of New York society. As the ‘invaders’ with their newly minted fortunes break down the barriers restricting entry into the exclusive circles, divorce becomes a marker used to distinguish – as money and leisure no longer can – the aristocracy from the upwardly mobile middle class” (149). When Undine presents Ralph with a divorce, she in effect dismantles those “barriers” that had previously restricted entry into this circle; Ralph falls in class status as a result, and this fall ultimately contributes to his suicide. Wharton thus shows us the potential of divorce as a destructive force, and by casting Ralph’s situation in a sympathetic light she affirms a liking, a respect, for the values of the past, a desire to preserve this faltering class and the foundation on which it stood, imagining in some ways that the values on which it is founded could staunch the perceived loss of meaning fostered by a consumer driven society that encouraged the production and consumption of quick and easy divorces.

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The divorce, as Wharton illustrates, does indeed create a crack in the stalwarts of this elite society, thereby exposing and intruding upon a world that derived its exclusiveness from a guarded sense of privacy. Sassoubre comments on this when, in addition to observing that “The Dagonet view of marriage [. . .] preserves the status quo,”

she also notes that it does so “by emphasizing a sentimental ideal of communion, of shared sensibilities. As is the case with their more general view of property relations, the Dagonets believe in the preservation of private, domestic life against more worldly concerns” (697). Here, Sassoubre aligns this “private, domestic life” with the sentimental, which helps expose the conflict that this subject proved to be for Wharton. This, as Sassoubre acknowledges, is an insular society intent on preservation. Its members, Ralph knows, “regarded a divorce-suit as a vulgar and unnecessary way of taking the public into one’s confidence” (Wharton, *Custom* 254). Moreover, divorce, a rupture, stands in opposition to the “sentimental ideal of communion,” which his family values. This is the same “sentimental ideal of communion” that drives Halleck’s belief in the preservation of a faltering marriage. Unlike Halleck, however, Ralph is forced into the divorce against his will; it becomes his own direct concern, despite his unwillingness to make it so, and it unravels the very thing that Ralph’s family (and Halleck) sought to preserve.

Wharton, despite acknowledging the value of adopting such a view, also recognizes its limitations, suggesting that when taken to the extreme such an intent focus on preservation, marked by an idealistic vision, can hinder an awareness of one’s present reality. When Ralph’s family refuses to discuss, or even acknowledge, the matter, for example, Ralph suffers. The narrator describes how “His family had thrown over the whole subject a pall of silence which even Laura Fairford shrank from raising. As for his mother, Ralph had seen at once that the idea of talking over the situation was positively frightening to her. There was no provision for such emergencies in the moral order of Washington Square. The affair was a ‘scandal’, and it was not in the Dagonet tradition to acknowledge the existence of scandals” (Wharton, *Custom* 265-266). The divorce, this

rupture to the traditional order of things, is considered an “emergency.” It does not square with the “moral order” of this world. This “moral order” is one that Wharton appreciated for its potential to help balance societal shifts, such as those prompted by divorce, but here she shows that a refusal to acknowledge the reality of the situation only brings about the destruction that the family (and Wharton to an extent) feared. McDowell asserts that Ralph’s mother “cannot see sexual matters clearly because she has been taught to evade such realities and is benumbed by fear of scandal” (56). Wharton, the realist, confronts these “realities” that Ralph’s mother attempts to evade. She thus draws a distinction between reality, associated here with “scandal,” or divorce, and the insular world of the Dagonets, calling throughout the novel for a merger of the two – a possibility that she tests with Ralph, who straddles both worlds.

Ralph, however, in attempting to uphold the family’s sense of integrity, is not able to achieve the balance that Wharton envisioned, but she does admire his effort to do what he regards as the right thing, a move that she simultaneously resists given *his* resistance to the reality of the situation. As Collins says, “Instead of developing an assertive public image, Ralph habitually retreats from confrontations” (200). She attributes this to his private visions, which “estrangle him from the reality of an external social environment” (200). This is evident in the following passage:

Ralph suspected that the constraint shown by his mother and sister was partly due to their having but a dim and confused view of what had happened. In their vocabulary the word ‘divorce’ was wrapped in such a dark veil of innuendo as no ladylike hand would care to lift. They had not reached the point of differentiating divorces but classed them indistinctively as disgraceful incidents, in which the woman was always to blame, but the man, though her innocent victim, was yet inevitably contaminated. The time involved in the ‘proceedings’ was viewed as a penitential season during which it behooved the family of the persons



concerned to behave as if they were dead; yet any open allusion to the reason for adopting such an attitude would have been regarded as the height of indelicacy. (Wharton, *Custom* 266)

The fact that his mother and sister have nothing but a “dim and confused” understanding of the incident further situates them as being remote, removed from reality, as indicated by how the term “divorce” is shrouded in a “dark veil of innuendo” through which they cannot see. The veil functions as a physical marker of separation. They have no understanding of “divorce” – what precedes it or what comes after. It is not considered “ladylike” and therefore is not acceptable, no matter the circumstances. Unable to differentiate one from the other, his mother and sister “class” them with no distinction and position Ralph as victim (victimized by what they would call an outsider). Because the divorce upsets his elite status in society, creating a loss of sorts that he is unable to recover, his family acts as if they are in mourning. This is significant because Wharton, despite remaining critical of their inability to confront this intrusion into their world and to recognize the individual circumstances surrounding each divorce case, also to an extent mourns the loss of the past to which they cling, a loss of a certain solidity in society that divorce, as she shows, only makes difficult to sustain.

Wharton’s conflicted attitude is further made apparent in her depiction of Mr. Dagonet’s response to the divorce. She describes how “Mr. Dagonet’s notion of the case was almost as remote from reality. All he asked was that his grandson should ‘thrash’ somebody, and he could not be made to understand that the modern drama of divorce is sometimes cast without a Lovelace” (Wharton, *Custom* 266). Wharton critiques him for failing to adopt a realist perspective and for failing to acknowledge divorce as a viable solution for a troubled marriage, but she goes on to at least partly affirm that she shares

similar sentiments regarding marriage. We see this when he says, “I never yet saw a marriage dissolved like a business partnership. Divorce without a lover? Why, it’s – it’s as unnatural as getting drunk on lemonade” (Wharton, *Custom* 266-267). Here, Wharton draws a distinction between what is “unnatural” – associated with the “modern drama of divorce” and with the “business” world, and the romantic chivalric world to which Mr. Dagonet alludes when he speaks of Lovelace, the seducer figure in *Clarissa*, the 1745 romance by Samuel Richardson. As a realist, Wharton looked beyond the romantic world of the past, and as a professional author she actively involved herself in the professional arena. Like Mr. Dagonet, however, she refused to view marriage as *nothing more* than a “business partnership.”

Hence, the fact that Mr. Dagonet aligns the scandal of divorce with the business world is telling, and it only reinforces Ralph’s already perceived sense of failure. This becomes clearer when the narrator describes how

After this first explosion, Mr. Dagonet also became silent; and Ralph perceived that what annoyed him most was the fact of the ‘scandal’ not being one in any gentlemanly sense of the word. It was like some nasty business mess, about which Mr Dagonet couldn’t pretend to have an opinion, since such things didn’t happen to men of his kind. That such a thing should have happened to his only grandson was probably the bitterest experience of his pleasantly uneventful life; and it added a touch of irony to Ralph’s unhappiness to know how little, in the whole affair, he was cutting the figure Mr Dagonet expected him to cut. (Wharton, *Custom* 267)

Ralph, we learn, feels like a failure for his inability to live up to the expectations set by his family. We can hear the pressure in this passage as his emphasis shifts to “how little” he has succeeded in preserving the form his family has cut for him. He is not acting in the “gentlemanly” way and instead finds himself involved in the type of “mess”

characterizing the less refined, and more volatile, “business” world, a world that he initially entered, much to the chagrin of his family, in an attempt to please his wife and preserve his marriage. The reality of the (traditionally masculine and bourgeois) business world kills his ideals.

This explicitly commercial world is one that Wharton, as a professional artist, viewed with ambivalence. As Kaplan notes, “Wharton, who wrote best-sellers in an age that coined the term, defined her own writing against the popular women’s fiction that preceded her and the society novelist, with whom she was often identified” (13). Wharton, in writing “best-sellers,” thus capitalizes on her writing, but still sought to establish herself as a professional, to distinguish her writing as significant work.

On the one hand, she feels for Ralph, who, upon learning that news of his divorce has been exploited by the press, becomes consumed by shame. The narrator describes how “his eye was caught by his own name on the first page of the heavily headlined paper which the unshaved occupant of the next seat held between grimy fists. The blood rushed to Ralph’s forehead as he looked over the man’s arm and read: ‘Society Leader Gets Decree’, and beneath it the subordinate clause: ‘Says Husband Too Absorbed In Business To Make Home Happy’. For weeks afterward, wherever he went, he felt that blush upon his forehead. For the first time in his life the coarse fingering of public curiosity had touched the secret places of his soul, and nothing that had gone before seemed as humiliating as this trivial comment on his tragedy” (Wharton, *Custom* 271). Ralph, in the press, is accused of failing to fulfill his responsibilities as a husband. In the papers he is literally reduced to a “subordinate clause,” while Undine continues her reign as “society leader,” a position that her marriage to Ralph enables her to attain. This

“tragedy,” this divorce, upsets the foundations on which he has built his life. His private (refined) world has been exposed to the “unshaved,” “grimy,” and “coarse.” He is thus “angry, sore, ashamed” (Wharton, *Custom* 269). By drawing such a contrast between the “coarse fingering of public curiosity” and the “secret places of his soul,” Wharton focuses our attention on the effects of divorce, illustrating (and critiquing) how this very real experience of Ralph’s is being consumed by others with a voyeuristic desire. In calling our attention to this matter, she simultaneously distinguishes her own writing as work addressing matters of significant import in an attempt to alleviate her fears that in writing about the inner turmoil of her class she was penning the kind of exposé for which the public hungered and that the mass market purveyed.

Wharton’s sympathy for Ralph is thus driven in part by a sense of privacy that she, like Ralph, valued, on both a professional and social level, and also by her own experience as a divorcée. As McDowell notes, “her own views on divorce, marriage, and love affairs are not always entirely consistent, even among stories and novels published in the same year. She tended to adopt a relativist view on these subjects, considering the moral implications of the individual situation in each work” (534). Unlike Ralph’s mother and sister, who are unable to distinguish one divorce from another, Wharton recognizes the necessity of divorce in some cases, including her own, but she makes no mention of her own divorce in her autobiography, and in her letters she expresses a hope that ““something may soon be decently, silently, & soberly arranged”” (qtd. in Lee 398). Her desire is for a quiet arrangement; she was well aware of the scandalous nature of the subject and of people’s varied attitudes toward it. Biographer Lee describes how “Wharton divorced in Paris to avoid publicity, since reporters were not allowed access to

the court proceedings or reports. She managed to keep her divorce out of the *New York Times* and *Town Topics* (which was busy reporting, in the very same week, on some notable divorce cases amongst the English aristocracy”) (399-400). The decision to file for divorce was not an easy one. This was a decision that she struggled with and ultimately decided to pursue following a decline in her husband’s mental health. She attained her divorce on grounds of adultery. The court noted that her husband “had also inflicted ‘*injures graves*’” (Lee 400). For Wharton, then, the decision to seek a divorce from her husband was one that she arrived at only after great thought.

Ralph is not given this opportunity. The shock of divorce is one with which he is unable to cope, despite his best efforts. When presented with the divorce, Ralph is forced to reconsider the values that form the basis of his existence; hence we see Wharton testing the strength of these values in the modern world. We learn that in the two years following his sickness, he “found that the face of life was changed for him” (Wharton, *Custom* 335). During this time, he discovers that he cannot depend on the values and traditions of his youth. The narrator describes how “In the interval he had gradually adapted himself to the new order of things; but the months of adaptation had been a time of such darkness and confusion that, from the vantage-ground of his recovered lucidity, he could not yet distinguish the stages by which he had worked his way out; and even now his footing was not secure” (Wharton, *Custom* 335). Ralph, we come to find, has made progress only by ‘adapting’ himself to what he calls “the new order of things.” His recovery and attempt to deal with the situation are described as evolutionary “stages” in his existence. He moves from “darkness and confusion,” from misunderstanding, to a sort of “recovered lucidity.” The fact that he has had to ‘work’ his way out is suggestive of a

struggle. With this shift to “work,” we see that the divorce prompts him to adopt more of a realist outlook on life. His “footing,” however, still is not “secure.” In the end, he finds that he has no firm foundation on which to stand. In attempting to move forward with his life, we learn that “His first effort had been to readjust his values – to take an inventory of them, and reclassify them, so that one at least might be to appear as important as those he had lost; otherwise there could be no reason why he should go on living. He applied himself doggedly to this attempt; but whenever he thought he had found a reason that his mind could rest in, it gave way under him, and the old struggle for a foothold began again” (Wharton, *Custom* 335). Ralph here feels that he has “lost” the values by which he defined his life, his sense of manhood, and his attempts to redefine these values leave him ungrounded. In fact, he indicates that without these values he has “no reason” to continue living. As Collins says, “There are no new values to replace the old ones” (200). In this novel, Wharton imagines divorce as the impetus for this loss.

The divorce thus punctures Ralph’s idealistic beliefs, prompting him to adopt what we might call a realist perspective. His writing is affected, and his romantic outlook on life changes. Whereas he used to live for what he called his dream, the existence of his child becomes “the all-sufficient reason for his own” (Wharton, *Custom* 335). He reflects, for example, how “The plain prose of it, of course, was that the economic situation remained unchanged by the sentimental catastrophe and that he must go on working for his wife and child” (Wharton, *Custom* 345). Here, he describes the reality of his situation as “plain prose” to distinguish it from what he calls the “sentimental catastrophe” of his life. Wharton, by referring to the practical nature of going forward alludes to a realist perspective which contrasts with the sentimental longings and ideals that shaped Ralph’s

romantic vision of love. The suggestion is that these ideals and longings in some ways deluded him from seeing reality. Now that he is reading the “plain prose,” we learn that he can no longer love again – “he could not conceive that tenderness and desire could ever again be one for him: such a notion as that seemed part of the monstrous sentimental muddle on which his life had gone aground” (Wharton, *Custom* 337). In this passage, he speaks of the wreckage of his life, its deviation from its expected course, going so far as to suggest that these delusions have left him in a “muddle” -- unable to move forward or backwards. He thus adopts a pessimistic, almost fatalistic view. We learn that “He no longer saw life on the heroic scale: he wanted to do something in which men should look no bigger than the insects they were” (Wharton, *Custom* 338). He reduces man here to insignificance. He no longer envisions writing a grand epic; rather, his vision is significantly scaled back. In one sense, then, Wharton presents the divorce as a good thing, for it rids Ralph of his sentimental delusions and grounds him more firmly in reality, a transformation of which Wharton the realist would approve.

Ralph is cognizant of the change in himself. In speaking of his son, he says, “Oh, the plodding citizen I’ve become will keep him from taking after the lyric idiot who begot him” (Wharton, *Custom* 361). Ralph now identifies himself as a “citizen,” as a respectable, involved member of society, but this to him is “plodding” and recalls the drudgery of the business world. Yet he regards his former person as a “lyric idiot,” thereby rejecting that lifestyle as well and cementing the notion that he has been displaced by the divorce. He has come up against limits on both sides, and Wharton presents him as a figure who has no place in the modern world. He does not fully achieve

the growth that Wharton as a realist promoted, choosing instead to halt that growth by taking his own life.

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In the end, Ralph loses his will to fight and ultimately succumbs to the inherited beliefs that Wharton on some levels valued and on others shunned. Divorce upsets a way of life that he is not able to recoup. With Ralph, Wharton shifts our attention to loss, showing us that divorce can be costly. To prevent a scandal, he decides against contesting the divorce, resulting in the loss of his wife, his money, his house, and his child. Ralph, in reflecting on this decision, recalls his family's discouragement: "'Spare your mother, Ralph, whatever happens,' and even Laura's terrified: 'Of course, for Paul's sake, there must be no scandal'" (Wharton, *Custom* 346). Ralph, in response, realizes, "For Paul's sake! And it was because, for Paul's sake, there must be no scandal, that he, Paul's father, had tamely abstained from defending his rights and contesting his wife's charges, and had thus handed the child over to her keeping!" (Wharton, *Custom* 346). He realizes at this point that inaction on his part has resulted in great loss. He describes, with grace, how he "tamely abstained" from pursuing his rights in order to uphold the sense of decency and privacy that his family valued. He acts selflessly here; his desire to do for others is a quality that Wharton appreciates, as is evident by the poignancy of the description surrounding his final moments, but amidst this appreciation she sustains her critique of his idleness, his inaction. When Ralph realizes what he has done, his

whole body throbbed with rage against the influences that had reduced him to such weakness. Then, gradually, he saw that the weakness was innate in him. He had been eloquent enough, in his youth, against the conventions of his class; yet when the moment came to show his contempt



for them they had mysteriously mastered him, deflecting his course like some hidden hereditary failing. As he looked back it seemed as though even his great disaster had been conventionalized and sentimentalized by his inherited attitude: that the thoughts he had thought about it were only those of generations of Dagonets, and that there had been nothing real and his own in his life but the foolish passion he had been trying too hard to think out of existence. (Wharton, *Custom* 346)

In this passage, Ralph reflects on how he had tried to distance himself from these values that he critiqued as a youth. In doing so, we see he has the power to reflect on them, but not actively change them. Again, he refers to his “weakness” and acknowledges that he “sentimentalized” the “great disaster” of his life. In referring to this incident in this way, however, he is still sentimentalizing the “disaster” which he refuses to name. This further demonstrates the hold that his inherited values have over him -- they are, as he says, “innate” -- and these values are again contrasted with what is “real.” Wharton, in upholding this division, complicates it and is able to draw out the moral conflict that she as an author regarded as necessary and that she too felt on a personal level.

Thus, her final portrait of Ralph is shaped by a sympathetic critique. When Ralph finds himself unable to reconcile his inherited values with the new ones that Undine, by presenting him with a divorce, forces him to confront, he takes his own life, thereby cementing his perceived loss of identity and ineffectuality. McDowell says, “Book 4 ends with Marvel’s pathetic suicide, a symbolic event denoting the weakness of his class despite the fine moral qualities that Wharton has established for him” (49). As Wharton shows us, these qualities, however admirable they may be, lack a certain strength in the modern world. We see this when the narrator describes how Ralph, once in the bedroom of his youth, “bolted the door and stood looking about the room. For a moment he was conscious of seeing it in every detail with a distinctness he had never before known; then

everything in it vanished but the single narrow panel of a drawer under one of the bookcases. He went up to the drawer, knelt down and slipped his hand into it” (Wharton, *Custom* 376). In the moments just before his death, he sees everything with a clarity that is new to him.

The reality of the situation opens his eyes, but the suggestion is that the reality is too much to bear. Thus, in a split second, he decides to take his life. We learn that “He passed his left hand over the side of his head, and down the curve of his skull behind the ear. He said to himself: ‘My wife . . . this will make it all right for her . . .’ and a last flash of irony twitched through him. Then he felt again, more deliberately, for the spot he wanted, and put the muzzle of the revolver against it” (Wharton, *Custom* 376). In his final moments, Ralph, for once, acts “deliberately.” He makes a quick decision with a firmness characteristic of the business world, yet his reasoning is in accordance with the values of his youth. Ralph, like Halleck, retreats, but he not only retreats from society -- he retreats from this world.

Thus Wharton shows us how this figure that was falling by the wayside at the time in which Howells was writing his novel had definitively lost his place in the early part of the twentieth century, a loss that Wharton, like Howells, adopts an ambivalent attitude toward. By pulling the trigger, Ralph sacrifices his own life to better his former wife’s. He dies attempting to protect and provide for her, an admirable move given his commitment, but one that costs him his life and one that shows us how these older values shaping his existence were giving way to those marking a consumer-driven society. This decision demonstrates a selflessness more aligned with the feminine in his present society. Hoeller identifies his final act as sentimental. She says, “Suicide [. . .] is perhaps

the final expenditure of the hero or heroine that has appeared to critics as the ultimate extravagance of sentimental fiction” (30). She goes on to say, “In sentimental stories, characters weaken and die like flies. This is clearly a ludicrous notion when read through the lens of realism but a stringent, powerful dynamic when characters have never been anything else but the signs of their passions. They wax and wane accordingly. Where else would they go? What else should or could they live for and signify?” (Hoeller 30). Ralph is much more than the sign of his “passions,” but he does expend his life in taking it – a move that Wharton critiques given her preference for economy over excess, for work, over idleness.

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Wharton, then, arrives at something of an impasse as Howells does, critiquing both the modern moment and the past on which it (she) depends. With Ralph, Wharton thus shows us the limits of both a sentimental and realist response as she attempts what Kaplan calls a “balancing act” (66). A close look at Ralph and his inability to succeed where Undine does illuminates this ‘struggle’ and suggests that there is little room in Ralph’s present (increasingly consumer driven) society for those with different, or dated rather, views. As Hume notes, “Marvell’s suicidal collapse forces readers to reflect on the deeper implications of his relation to the volatile personal and cultural circumstances that consume him” (137). Divorce functions as one of these forces that “consume” him, and Wharton’s attitude toward him remains conflicted. On professional grounds, Wharton had distanced herself from the qualities that he embodies, namely those of the idle dilettante, but as an author she also found herself drawn to his conflict and to this subject matter. This creates a tension in the text further amplified by the fact that on a social (and

personal) level she sympathizes with his struggle to reconcile the values of his youth with those shaping the modern world. This struggle is represented in this novel by the divorce, which thematically highlights this figure's inability to unite the two worlds he inhabits and which more largely reflects Wharton's attempts to mediate her own conflicting responses to this subject.

## CONCLUSION

While the subject of divorce is not as contentious today as it was at the time in which Howells, James, and Wharton were writing, its prevalence speaks to the importance of understanding the early impact it had on society and on the shifting roles of men and women, which remain in flux. This is especially true considering that the divisive issue today is not so much divorce as it is marriage and the way in which we define it – a subject tied just as closely as ever to gender and class issues – and one that still at its core revolves around questions of morality and democracy. Given the centrality of marriage in society and consequently the pivotal role it plays in the history of the novel, a close look at how authors have addressed (and unraveled) the subject over the years – both formally and thematically – can foster valuable insight about its changing nature and shape. Like these realists, then, who shift our attention to a past that they simultaneously resisted, it behooves us to follow suit and consider – a century or more later – the structural foundations on which our current understanding of the issues rest.

Because Howells, James, and Wharton were all writing during the years when divorce became prominent, there is much to gain from a close look at their novels that address the issue. These are novels that not only capture a realistic glimpse of life at that time but also participate in the construction of a new reality that was taking shape. As Kaplan asserts, “The realism that develops in American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s is not a seamless package of a triumphant bourgeois mythology but an anxious and

contradictory mode which both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life” (9). It is an “anxious and contradictory mode” indeed, and this tension, which manifests itself in these novels in the form of a liminal upper-class male figure who finds his (already faltering) sense of manhood and class status threatened by divorce, is the direct result of each author’s active engagement with emergent social issues.

As Howells, James, and Wharton show, this figure is one that had been driven to the margins of society amid economic and cultural shifts that altered the social landscape. As such, he is a figure that even the histories largely overlook, and while each of these authors positions him as the marginal character that society made him out to be, they also affirm his importance by highlighting the effect of divorce on him, even when he is not directly involved in the matter, which consequently highlights the importance of the work they were doing as novelists. Margaret Marsh comments briefly on the neglected arenas of social history in her discussion of what she calls the “domestic man,” affirming that even “[i]f the image of domestic man came only from this prescriptive literature, it would still be important as a sign of changing cultural models” (112). In each of these realist novels, this figure’s decline (and concurrent loss of manhood) is tied to a sense of moral failing that made these authors wary, leading them to critique both the past and the modern moment as they explore divorce as both cause and effect of this loss. A close look at this figure’s struggles reveals the conflicting aesthetic and social priorities of these authors and the way in which they converge. The result is a sympathetic critique of this displaced figure that thus plays a central role in each of these novels on both a formal and thematic level.

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